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50¢/Free to Deployed Areas

US strikes Iran-backed group after troops hurt

By AAMER MADHANI,
ZEKE MILLER
AND QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden ordered the United States military to carry out retaliatory airstrikes against Iranian-backed militia groups after three U.S. service members were injured in a drone attack in northern Iraq.

National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said one of the U.S. troops suffered critical injuries in the attack that occurred earlier Monday. The Iranian-backed militia Kataib Hezbollah and affiliated groups, under an umbrella of Iranian-backed militants, claimed credit for the attack that utilized a one-way attack drone.

Iraqi officials said U.S. strikes targeting militia sites early Tuesday killed one militant and injured 18. They came at a time of heightened fears of a regional spillover of the Israel-Hamas war.

Iran announced Monday that an Israeli strike on the outskirts of the Syrian capital of Damascus killed one of its top generals, Razi Mousavi, who had been a close companion of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the former head of Iran's elite Quds Force. Soleimani was slain in a U.S. drone strike in Iraq in January 2020.

Iranian officials vowed revenge for the killing of Mousavi but did not immediately launch a retaliatory strike. The militia attack Monday in northern Iraq was launched prior to the strike in Syria that killed Mousavi.

SEE STRIKES ON PAGE 7



FELIPE DANA/AP

Ukraine Special Operations Forces return from a night mission in the Kherson region of Ukraine in June.

Inside Ukraine's Center 73

Special Operations Forces' clandestine missions shape war behind the front line

By MISTYSLAV CHERNOV
Associated Press

KHERSON, Ukraine — Their first battle plan was outdated the moment the dam crumbled. So the Ukrainian special forces officers spent six months adapting their fight to secure a crossing to the other side of the Dnieper River in southern Ukraine.

But it wasn't enough just to cross the river. They needed backup to hold it. And for that, they needed proof that it could be done.

RELATED

Russian navy ship in Crimea hit by Ukrainian airstrike
Page 8

For one of the officers, nicknamed Skif, that meant a Ukrainian flag — and a photo op.

Skif, Ukrainian shorthand for the nomadic Scythian people who

founded an empire on what is now Crimea, moves like the camouflaged amphibian that he is: Calculating, deliberate, until the time to strike.

He is a Center 73 officer, one of Ukraine's most elite units of special forces — water operations specialists, frontline scouts, drone operators, underwater saboteurs. They are part of the Special Operations Forces that run partisans in occupied territories, sneak into Russian barracks to plant bombs

and prepare the ground for reclaiming territory seized by Russia.

Their mission on the more dynamic of the two main fronts in the six-month counteroffensive reflects many of the problems of Ukraine's broader effort. It's been one of the few counteroffensive successes for the Ukrainian army.

By late May, the Center 73 men were in place along the river's

SEE MISSIONS ON PAGE 9

BUSINESS/WEATHER

Toyota unit shuts down factories during probe

Associated Press

TOKYO — Daihatsu, a unit of Japanese automaker Toyota Motor Corp., has shut down production lines at all its four factories in Japan while transport ministry officials investigate improper tests for safety certifications.

The shutdown as of Tuesday comes a week after Daihatsu Motor Co. announced it was suspending all vehicle shipments in and outside Japan after finding improper testing involving 64 models. That led transport ministry of-

ficials to launch a deeper probe into problems that apparently persisted for decades.

The stoppage is expected to affect thousands of auto parts makers and their employees in a potential blow to local economies.

The safety test irregularities earlier this year triggered an independent panel investigation, which found widespread and systematic problems at Daihatsu. It is the latest of safety or other violations found at at least five of Japan's major automakers in recent

years. So far, there have been no reports of accidents or deaths due to the falsified tests.

Daihatsu, maker of Hijet trucks and vans and Mira hatchbacks, said it started shutting down some lines Monday and production stopped at all four plants in Shiga, Kyoto and Oita prefectures as well as at its headquarters in Osaka on Tuesday. The company declined to say when production will resume, while media reports said lines will be suspended at least through January.

EXCHANGE RATES

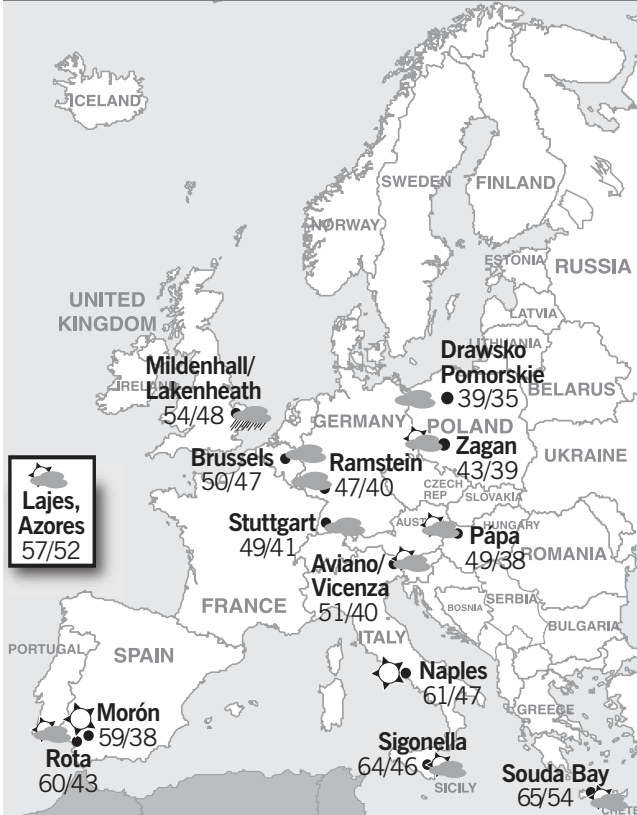
Military rates		Switzerland (Franc)	0.8550
Euro costs (Dec. 27)	\$1.08	Thailand (Baht)	34.61
British pound (Dec. 27)	\$1.24	Turkey (NewLira)	29.3393
Japanese yen (Dec. 27)	140.00	(Military exchange rates are those available to customers at military banking facilities in the country of issuance for Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. For nonlocal currency exchange rates (i.e., purchasing British pounds in Germany), check with your local military banking facility. Commercial rates are interbank rates provided for reference when buying currency. All figures are foreign currencies to one dollar, except for the British pound, which is represented in dollars-to-pound, and the euro, which is dollars-to-euro.)	
South Korean won (Dec. 27)	1266.00	INTEREST RATES	
Commercial rates		Prime rate	8.50
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3767	Interest Rates Discount rate	6.00
Britain (Pound)	1.2706	Federal funds market rate	5.33
Canada (Dollar)	1.3209	3-month bill	5.39
China (Yuan)	7.1438	30-year bond	4.05
Denmark (Krone)	6.7610		
Egypt (Pound)	30.8723		
Euro	0.9069		
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.8109		
Hungary (Forint)	345.84		
Israel (Shekel)	3.6305		
Japan (Yen)	142.40		
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3071		
Norway (Krone)	10.2069		
Philippines (Peso)	55.43		
Poland (Zloty)	3.93		
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7490		
Singapore (Dollar)	1.3239		
South Korea (Won)	1294.50		

WEATHER OUTLOOK

WEDNESDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



WEDNESDAY IN EUROPE



THURSDAY IN THE PACIFIC



The weather is provided by the American Forces Network Weather Center, 2nd Weather Squadron at Offutt Air Force Base, Neb.

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MILITARY

Osprey crashes may endanger Bell funds

Safety concerns swirl around new tilt-rotor aircraft

By JOSEPH MORTON
The Dallas Morning News

WASHINGTON — Aerospace manufacturer Bell Textron is developing the Army's next long-range assault aircraft as part of a major defense contract, but that program could face headwinds resulting from recent fatal crashes of the company's V-22 Osprey.

Bell pioneered, along with Boeing, the helicopter-airplane hybrid Osprey, assembled at facilities in Amarillo, Texas.

The company also went with a tilt-rotor design on its proposed V-280 Valor, which the Army chose last year to replace the iconic UH-60 Black Hawk.

The V-280 beat out the compound rotor Defiant X offered by a collaboration of Boeing and Connecticut-based Sikorsky, which is owned by Lockheed Martin.

Members of Connecticut's congressional delegation have raised questions about the award process and the safety of tilt-rotor designs. Those concerns could get new life in the wake of several incidents, including a Nov. 29 crash off the coast of Japan that killed all eight airmen on board. The U.S. has grounded the Ospreys as it investigates the cause.

Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., who sits on the Senate Appropriations Committee, has raised concerns about tilt-rotor aircraft generally and the Army's selection process won by the V-280.

"I just continue to have real misgivings about shoveling money into a program that is resulting in this kind of fatality rate," Murphy told *The Dallas Morning News*.

Bell has previously defended the Osprey's safety record, but referred all questions to the Air Force following the Nov. 29 crash.

The Government Accountability



U.S. Army Acquisition Support Center

This Bell V-280 Valor is one of two aircraft selected for further testing under the JMR-TD program.

Office rejected a Sikorsky protest of the contract award, which Murphy said means there's no legal avenue for reversing the award. But he added Congress — and specifically his committee — will determine how much money flows into the program.

Murphy grilled the Secretary of the Army during a May hearing about the contract award, acknowledging his own parochial interest while emphasizing concerns about safety and costs.

He said the Osprey has fallen short of expectations on mission readiness, procurement costs and per-flight price tag. The Bell bid for the new Army aircraft was significantly higher than Sikorsky's, and costs could keep growing, he said.

In an interview following the November crash, Murphy reiterated his concerns.

"My heart goes out to the individuals and the families affected," Murphy said. "There's a pretty troubling record of failure with these aircraft, and this is something I've raised with the military consistently. We've made a big new commitment to tilt-rotor aircraft, and I hope that that doesn't come with a fatal price for our soldiers, sailors and airmen."

Battles over defense contracts can carry political ramifications.

House Appropriations Commit-

tee Chair Kay Granger represents Fort Worth, where Bell has its headquarters. Sikorsky is based in Connecticut's 3rd Congressional District, which is represented by Rep. Rosa DeLauro, the top Democrat on the Appropriations Committee who has taken issue with the V-280 selection.

Crash history

The Osprey's creation followed Operation Eagle Claw, the botched 1980 attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran.

That operation was plagued by a series of mishaps and challenges stemming from the limited capabilities of Vietnam-era Sea Stallion helicopters.

A sandstorm and mechanical problems knocked out three of the eight helicopters before they even reached a staging area, prompting then-President Jimmy Carter to abort the mission.

As they started withdrawing, one of the Sea Stallions collided with a C-130. Eight servicemen died.

The Pentagon decided it needed a new cutting-edge transport, one that could take off vertically like a helicopter, then fly with the speed and range of a traditional propeller plane.

Bell and Boeing got the contracts to perfect the design and put it into production. The program

faced challenges and setbacks, with high-profile fatal crashes threatening to shut it down.

After much re-engineering, the Osprey went into operation in 2007 and has since become a workhorse for the military, shuttling troops around and taking on an array of new missions even as production of new aircraft has been winding down.

A series of crashes in the past two years has raised new questions about safety.

Five Marines were killed June 8, 2022, in an Osprey crash in Southern California. Investigators attributed the crash to problems with the clutch, an issue that has plagued Ospreys for at least a decade.

The report on that crash stated the safety record of the Osprey was "consistent with that of other tactical aircraft" flown by the U.S. military.

"The mishap of 8 June 2022 does not statistically invalidate the safety of the platform within the broader context of over 422,000 successful MV22B and CMV-22B flight hours flown in the past 10 years," according to the report.

Still, the report stated the root cause of the clutch problem remained unknown and was impossible to prevent without improvements to the aircraft and robust inspections.

The military has been working on those improvements even as incidents continue, and Ospreys have been repeatedly grounded.

U.S. military officials have defended the overall safety record of the aircraft after crashes, including one that killed three Marines and injured others onboard during an August training exercise in Australia.

Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said at the time that all such incidents are investigated and the safety of military personnel is a priority.

She downplayed the need for a holistic review of the aircraft and

cautioned against jumping to conclusions about common causes.

"Every time this happens, of course, we always think about the service members who are putting their lives at risk, but I wouldn't say that they're all connected in one way or another," Singh said.

She said that if crash investigations reveal the need to adjust how the military is using Ospreys, it would do so.

"We do certainly have confidence in the Osprey," she said.

Similar but different

The V-280 has plenty in common with the Osprey but it's not identical. It's smaller and while it also uses a tilt-rotor approach, there are key differences.

Like the Osprey, it can take off and land vertically, then rotate its propellers forward and fly like a plane. But on the V-280, the entire engine doesn't rotate, just the gearboxes and prop-rotors.

It's unclear exactly how many jobs will flow from the contract, or where they will be located, but Bell has been pushing forward on new facilities in the Dallas-Fort Worth area since winning the award.

That includes registering plans with the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation to construct a \$20 million, 37,775-square-foot building in Grand Prairie.

Bell says it is making progress on the contract and recently completed required reviews to "ensure that we are developing the capability our warfighter needs."

Army officials said in a statement that they don't anticipate any impact on the contract awarded to Bell in December 2022 from the recent crash.

"Safety remains a top priority and the Army will ensure the utmost rigor and discipline in the design, development and qualification of the FLRAA aircraft," according to the statement, referring to the Future Long-Range Assault Aircraft program.

Navy relieves chief of electronic warfare unit on USS Vinson

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The commanding officer of an electronic warfare squadron from Naval Air Station Whidbey Island in Washington deployed to the Western Pacific on the USS Carl Vinson has been relieved of command, the Navy said Friday.

Cmdr. William Coulter was removed as commander of the Electronic Attack Squadron 136 by Rear Adm. Carlos Sardiello, commander of Carrier Strike Group 1, "due to a loss of confidence in his ability to command," according to



Coulter

a statement released by the U.S. 7th Fleet in Yokosuka, Japan.

Coulter had commanded the squadron since January 2023.

The squadron deployed in October to the Western Pacific on the Carl Vinson, a Nimitz-class, nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. The Carl Vinson is in Singapore now. The ship has been taking part in exercises with Japanese and Fili-

pino military forces amid what The Associated Press termed in November were "brushes with China" over the South China Sea.

Cmdr. Paul Ritter, executive officer of the squadron, will take command effective immediately, the Navy said.

Ritter had been scheduled to take command of the squadron in April 2024, according to the Navy statement.

Coulter is being temporarily reassigned to Electronic Attack Wing Pacific, which is headquartered at Whidbey Island in Oak

Harbor, north of Seattle.

"Navy commanding officers are held to high standards of personal and professional conduct. They are expected to uphold the highest standards of responsibility, reliability, and leadership, and the Navy holds them accountable when they fall short of those standards," the Navy said in the Coulter announcement.

The military frequently uses "loss of confidence" as the reason for relieving a commanding officer.

The squadron, nicknamed

"Gauntlets," flies the EF-18G Growler, a variant of the F/A-18F Super Hornet. The two-seat aircraft is used to jam or disrupt enemy radar and other electronics.

The Carl Vinson is the flagship of Carrier Strike Group 1, which also includes Carrier Air Wing 2, the guided-missile cruiser USS Princeton, and guided-missile destroyers of Destroyer Squadron 1. The Carl Vinson and the other ships are homeported in San Diego.

PACIFIC

Japan to approve Marine runway permits

By MARI HIGA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A Japanese Cabinet minister is expected to signal a return to work on a Marine Corps runway at Camp Schwab on Thursday, three days after Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki ignored a court order to approve construction changes himself.

Japanese Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Tetsuo Saito notified Okinawa prefecture on Tuesday morning that Saito by proxy on Thursday will approve 3½-year-old requests for permits for construction changes at the airfield, a spokesman for the ministry's Water and Disaster Management Bureau told Stars and Stripes by phone Tuesday.

The runway being built on reclaimed land in Oura Bay in the rural Henoko area of Okinawa is a planned replacement for Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in urban, densely populated Ginowan.

A copy of Saito's letter was sent via email Tuesday morning; the original letter is expected to arrive at the Okinawa prefectural government offices on Wednesday afternoon. The ministry spokesman called Tamaki's refusal "truly regrettable."

Some government officials in Japan may speak to the media only on condition of anonymity.

Tamaki may take the case again to Japan's Supreme Court, he said in a statement posted Monday on the prefecture's website. The court

in September ruled against him on nearly the same question.

"There are various problems with the judgment, and I decided it was difficult to give the approval as a governor entrusted by many prefectural citizens who oppose the construction of Henoko new base," he wrote Monday.

The prefecture plans to file another appeal with the Supreme Court by Wednesday, a spokesman for the prefecture's Henoko Base Construction Countermeasures Division said by phone Tuesday.

Tamaki, who opposes the U.S. military presence in Okinawa, in November 2021 denied the pending requests for permits at Schwab but was overruled by Saito, who deemed the governor's decision "il-

legal and unreasonable."

Tamaki began a protracted legal battle, filing and losing three suits to block the permits, culminating in the September loss at the Supreme Court.

The governor continued to refuse the permits and the Fukuoka High Court, Naha branch, on Dec. 20 ruled again in Saito's favor and ordered Tamaki to approve the permits by Monday.

Appealing to the Supreme Court cannot halt the construction. Japan's Local Autonomy Act states that the latest decision by the Fukuoka High Court remains in effect unless the Supreme Court overturns the ruling.

Tamaki argues that the soft seabed in the construction zone

poses a hazard and that Tokyo had failed to consider the environmental impact on the endangered dugong, a cousin of the manatee protected by Japanese law.

The Sankei Shinbun, citing unnamed sources at Japan's Ministry of Defense, reported Tuesday that the reclamation work on Oura Bay will resume on Jan. 12.

A spokesman for the Defense Bureau, which represents the Defense Ministry in the prefecture and had asked for the construction changes, declined to provide the starting date of the reclamation work when reached by phone Tuesday.

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Logistics Marines set to lead Okinawa-to-Guam move

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

CAMP BLAZ, Guam — Starting late next year, a logistics detachment is expected to kick off a long-awaited, multiyear relocation of Marines from Okinawa to the service's newest base in the Indo-Pacific.

The main cantonment of Camp Blaz, Gaum — named in honor of the late Brig. Gen. Vincente "Ben" Blaz, a Guam native — has been under construction since August 2017 to host about 1,300 members of the III Marine Expeditionary Force. Another 3,700 Marines will be based there as a rotational force.

The first group of Marines to move from Okinawa "will be a small detachment of logistics Marines," Blaz spokeswoman Maj. Diann Rosenfeld told Stars and Stripes Nov. 30 during a tour of the 4,000-acre base. It's been operated by a skeleton staff since it officially opened in January.

Rosenfeld didn't identify the detachment that would make the first move but said additional detachments will follow to build the foundations to receive more and more Marines.

"We will be at full operational capability in 2028," she said.

The 50 Marines already assigned to Blaz are working out of newly built offices for Marine aviation units at nearby Andersen Air Force Base on Guam's northern coast.

Under an agreement with the United States to move Marines off Okinawa, Japan is paying \$3 billion of the estimated \$8.6 billion needed to build Blaz and its surrounding infrastructure.

The plan to move Marines off Okinawa was born out of massive protests following the 1995 rape of a 12-year-old Okinawan girl by two Marines and a sailor. Locals also demanded the closure of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma due to safety concerns in a densely packed urban area and sought a smaller U.S. military footprint there.

The southern island prefecture is home to about 30,000 U.S. troops — about half of all American service members based in Japan.



SETH ROBSON/Stars and Stripes

Construction workers build Marine Corps barracks at Camp Blaz, Guam, on Nov. 30.

include a pair of large hangars — each able to accommodate a squadron of 12 MV-22 Osprey aircraft — a logistics building and a wing support building.

A fitness center for the Marines is already up and running on Andersen and a dining facility will open in the summer, Rosenfeld said.

A live-fire complex between Blaz's main cantonment and Andersen is also largely complete, although work is still underway on a machine-gun range.

Bullets are already blasting down the Mason Live Fire Range Complex, which is being validated by the Defense Department and will have its official grand opening early next year, range director Robert Ledyard said during Stripes' visit.

Blaz's main cantonment, where the bulk of Marines will live and work, was a hive of activity during Stars and Stripes' visit. Forty construction projects were ongoing, and an army of yellow-vested contract workers swarmed over gray concrete rising from brown dirt amid clouds of dust.

Jungle has been cleared, the terrain land-

scaped down to bedrock, and waterworks and underground utilities have been installed. Roads are in place, although Blaz is designed to allow Marines to walk around the campus.

A headquarters building, post office and medical clinic appear close to completion. Several multistory barracks, which will each accommodate hundreds of officers or enlisted troops, loom over the base, although each is a work in progress.

Work on the base to date has cost \$2.5 billion, Rosenfeld said. U.S.-funded projects at Blaz have an estimated budget of \$680 million for fiscal year 2024. Japan-funded projects there are worth an estimated \$430 million for the same period.

Graves and butterflies

The Marines have preserved several ancient, unmarked graves on the base. Unearthed during construction, the graves contain the remains of indigenous people who inhabited the site in pre-colonial times.

One grave site has been landscaped with plaques added and a crypt built to inter any

other remains discovered on Blaz. Other graves have been left in their natural state and will be fenced off, Rosenfeld said.

The Marines are helping conserve endangered Mariana eight-spot butterflies that flutter around Guam's north end by creating habitats for them behind the firing ranges, she said.

Some locals, however, see potential pitfalls as the Marines build up their presence on the island.

Leland Bettis, a director of the Guam-based Pacific Center for Island Security, said the Marines had cleared hundreds of acres of pristine forest and disturbed historical sites, such as the graves, to build the base.

There's potential for pressure on off-base housing or clashes with local culture with the arrival of so many additional Marines on Guam, he told Stars and Stripes at the Hotel Nikko Guam on Dec. 1.

Marine Maj. Sean Fay has watched the base take shape during his three-year stint on Guam, he said at Andersen a day earlier.

The aviation officer said he has helped incoming Marine, Navy and foreign aviation units take advantage of the facilities built for future Blaz troops.

Fay said Task Force 72 from Naval Air Facility Misawa in northeastern Japan has operated its P-8A Poseidon surveillance planes out of one of the Marines' new Andersen hangars. The building has also been used by fighter jets deployed from Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni near Hiroshima.

In January, aviators will be able to use a second hangar built for Marines at Andersen, he said.

Guam has plenty of fun things for Marines to do in their free time, added Fay, whose family lives in off-base housing near Blaz.

"I take my son to the beach and do snorkeling, swimming, surfing and hiking," he said.

It's been interesting watching the new base take shape, Fay added.

"When I got there, the main cantonment was just earth," he said. "And now it's all coming together."

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MILITARY

Airmen earn honors for Afghan heroics

Air Force to award Distinguished Flying Crosses, Bronze Star Medals for 2021 withdrawal work

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force will award one dozen airmen Distinguished Flying Crosses and four more Bronze Star Medals for their efforts during the chaotic 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, service officials said.

Air Mobility Command approved those honors last month in a final awards board for the evacuation alongside 208 Air Medals and 73 Meritorious Service Medals for airmen who participated in Operation Allies Refuge, the service announced Wednesday. The awards will be presented to maintainers, loadmasters, aircraft security forces,

aeromedical evacuation personnel and tanker aircrews, who joined hundreds of other Air Force troops cited for their efforts to remove thousands of Americans, Afghans and allies from Kabul in the final days of the war.

The Distinguished Flying Cross is a valor decoration for heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight. Many of those receiving the honor are joining other members of their crews, including pilots, who had already been awarded the DFC for evacuation actions, according to the Air Force.

Most of the other medals announced last week include combat

“C” devices, showing the honors were earned under combat conditions, the service said. One of the three Bronze Stars includes a “V” device for valor, the fourth highest award for battlefield heroics.

The Air Force did not provide names of recipients or their units, saying that information would be released later.

Air Force Gen. Mike Minihan, the commander of Air Mobility Command, in a statement called the honors “long overdue.”

“I am proud to recognize another group of mobility airmen who accomplished heroic feats two years ago,” he said. “There is no clearer evidence that airmen will always

be the magic.”

Aircrews worked around the clock in August 2021 to remove more than 124,000 people from Afghanistan as the Taliban capped a lightning-fast offensive to take over much of the country, including Kabul.

The aircrews flew people from Kabul’s Hamid Karzai International Airport, where thousands more spent days crowded around the small airport in Taliban-controlled land trying to leave Afghanistan. On Aug. 26, 2021, an Islamic State suicide bomber set off a blast at the airport’s Abbey Gate killing nearly 200 people in the crowd, including 13 U.S. service members.

U.S. military officials have awarded hundreds of honors to troops who served in the evacuation effort.

The latest round of Air Force awards could be the final tranche for efforts among airmen because the authorities to grant those awards expired Nov. 30, a service spokeswoman said.

Last month, the Air Force awarded eight Distinguished Flying Crosses, two Bronze Star Medals, 229 Air Medals and 98 Meritorious Service Medals for those who supported evacuation efforts.

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Marine decorated for satellite stopgap fix

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A Marine on Okinawa who repaired a mobile satellite communications terminal with a 3D-printed part earlier this year was recognized by the Marine Corps recently for his effort.

Sgt. Malik Pugh, 24, a digital wideband systems maintainer with Marine Wing Communications Squadron 18, was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal during a Dec. 6 ceremony at Camp Kinser, according to a Marine news release shortly afterward. The award was presented by Brig. Gen. Adam Chalkley, commander of the 3rd Marine Logistics Group.

Pugh, of Fairview Heights, Ill., distinguished himself over the summer, when he was called to work on a mobile communications satellite on wheels, known as a Very Small Aperture Terminal-Large, according to his award recommendation from the Corps. The terminal allows the exchange of high-bandwidth voice, video and data in support of intelligence and logistics missions.

Pugh and other repairmen began to tinker with the terminal to find out what caused the shutdown, the recommendation said. He soon identified the culprit, a faulty WCTRL-11 cable, called a Whiskey-11 by the Marines.

The cable, which carries data signals, is made up of several parts that must be ordered individually to field a viable replacement, Lt. Col. Matt Bowman, assistant chief of staff for communications and electronics with the 3rd Marine Logistics Group, told Stars and Stripes by email Dec. 19.

The part, a \$0.48 plastic housing for pin connectors that plugs di-



MATTHEW M. BURKE/Stars and Stripes

Marine Sgt. Malik Pugh in his home workshop at Camp Foster in Okinawa, Japan, earlier this month.

rectly into the terminal, was on back order, meaning it would take more than a year to arrive.

“I was like, ‘OK, I’ll be back tomorrow with a cable,’” Pugh recalled Dec. 18 at his home workshop at Camp Foster. “We have the schematics; it’s not that hard to build.”

Pugh spent dozens of hours at home designing the specialized connector in a computer-aided design file, according to the recommendation. Soon, his LulzBot 3D printer was spinning plastic filament; he also had to perform the tedious task of rewiring the cable.

Armed with a working prototype, Pugh brought the file to Marines of 3rd Maintenance Battalion, the recommendation said. They printed the final product,

which was then successfully tested.

The terminal was brought back online, and Pugh’s plastic connector was deemed a worthy stopgap going forward, the recommendation said.

“He looked for a solution outside of the training manual and was able to help increase the readiness of one of our critical communications assets,” Bowman said. “His impact goes beyond the operational success of satellite repair.”

The Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal is awarded to service members below the rank of colonel for meritorious service or achievement in combat or non-combat. The medal may either recognize sustained performance or a specific achievement that

does not warrant a higher award.

For Pugh, making the part was just another day at the office, he said. The Marine is known around Okinawa for cruising to work on a motorized skateboard; his barracks’ workshop at Kinser was notoriously packed with electronics and tools.

Now living in family housing on Foster, the workshop full of remote-controlled cars, humanoid robots and commercial drones, has grown in size. He said he hopes his technical acumen inspires a new generation of tech-savvy Marines.

“If you got somebody thinking on their feet out there, man, that’s a lethal weapon right there,” Pugh said. “That’s something I want to spread to other Marines.”

Committee resumes talk on Sweden NATO bid

Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey — The Turkish parliament’s foreign affairs committee was poised on Tuesday to resume deliberations on Sweden’s bid to join NATO, days after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan linked the Nordic country’s admission on U.S. approval of Turkey’s request to purchase F-16 fighter jets.

NATO-member Turkey lifted its objection to Sweden joining the trans-Atlantic alliance in July but the ratification process has since stalled in parliament.

Turkey accuses Sweden of not taking Turkey’s security concerns seriously enough, including its fight against Kurdish militants and other groups that Ankara considers to be security threats.

This month, Erdogan threw another obstacle by openly linking ratification of Sweden’s NATO membership to the U.S. Congress’ approval of Turkey’s request to purchase 40 new F-16 fighter jets and kits to modernize its existing fleet.

The Turkish leader also called on the two legislatures to act “simultaneously” and said Canada and other NATO allies must lift arms embargoes imposed on Turkey.

The White House has backed the Turkish F-16 request but there is strong opposition in Congress to military sales to Turkey.

The Turkish parliament’s foreign affairs committee had begun discussing Sweden’s membership in NATO last month.

MILITARY

German families open homes to US soldiers

By PHILLIP WALTER
WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

For the three U.S. soldiers taking part in the Christmas Eve festivities at the Buerger family home in Zweibruecken, Germany, entertainment included rousing games of Cards Against Humanity and shots from skull-shaped glasses.

It may not have been the most standard means of celebrating the yuletide, but Army Staff Sgt. Matthew Fox nevertheless had no problem fitting in with his hosts, Ulf and Manuela Buerger and their teenage son T.J.

"I feel like I've known these guys for a long time," Fox said, adding that it was a blessing for him to be with Buergers for the Christmas season.

Fox, who is assigned to the 44th Expeditionary Signal Battalion-Enhanced at Baumholder, is one of about a dozen single American soldiers stationed in the area who spent the holiday with German host families, part of a decades-old program reactivated this year after a three-year break during the pandemic.

Known as Operation Good Cheer, the program has paired about 1,100 American soldiers with German families since it was launched in the 1970s, according to the Army.

Fox is the third American soldier the Buergers have welcomed through the program. This Christmas Eve, two additional soldiers the family knew through a friend joined their festivities independently.

"I know how it is to be alone at Christmas," said Buerger, who served in the German military. "For me, this is about bringing friends together and having a good time. That's the spirit of Christmas."

U.S. Army Garrison Rheinland-Pfalz organizes Operation Good Cheer, which it says is aimed at fostering cultural exchange and understanding. The soldiers and host families met for the first time

at a group event earlier in the month.

Afterward, the soldiers received invitations for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, the day after Christmas — which is also a German holiday — or a combination of days. Some slept over, particularly those celebrating with alcohol.

Elsewhere in Rheinland-Pfalz, Viktoria and Florian Gerss donned medieval German outfits to welcome Sgt. Stuart McMullen and Pfc. Jaheim McLain, both with the 515th Transportation Company at Baumholder, to their home for Christmas Eve.

The couple live near the town of Birkenfeld and have a penchant for medieval reenactments. Along with their four children, ages 14 to 33, they have participated in Operation Good Cheer for several years.

They even invited a soldier they had previously hosted for Christmas to celebrate with them when the program was suspended.

"We connected with the soldier and wrote often so that soldier came to us twice without Operation Good Cheer," Viktoria said. "This is our Christmas tradition now."

McMullen said the thought of spending the holiday in the home of people he'd only recently met was intimidating at first.

But he overcame his initial hesitance, joining in a game of Uno with the Gerss family as honey wine flowed.

"Since I arrived in Germany, I've done a lot of traveling, but I never got to experience actual German family culture," McMullen said. "That's why I thought this would be a cool experience."

Another soldier with the 515th Transportation Company, Spc. Lamar Porter, spent Christmas Day in the neighboring state of Saarland, with Alexander and Tina Schweitzer and their 9-year-old son Silas at their home in Primstal.

"Nobody should be alone on Christmas," Tina Schweitzer said while serving coffee and cakes



PHOTOS BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

From left, Army Staff Sgt. Matthew Fox, Staff Sgt. Mary Porter, T.J. Buerger, Manuela Buerger, Sgt. John Oliviero and Ulf Buerger play Cards Against Humanity on Christmas Eve at the Buergers' home in Zweibruecken, Germany.

next to a towering Christmas tree.

"And I can speak English," Silas interjected, saying what he considers his favorite aspect of the program.

The Schweitzers signed up this year for the first time after seeing an advertisement in a German newspaper. They're already planning to participate in Operation Good Cheer next year, and they invited Porter over for another visit in the spring.

Porter, a transport operator, thinks there should be more initiatives linking soldiers with the German community to help "build a home away from home."

A simple Christmas get-together can have a lasting impact on all those involved, as the Buerger family can attest to.

"The first soldier we ever hosted wrote to me a few months ago and said he found a photo from that night," Buerger said.

"He explained how he had problems with father figures in the past and that he still thinks about the good time he had here. That's why my door is open."

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Sgt. Stuart McMullen, left, and Susanne Gerss enjoy a game of Uno at the Gerss' home near Birkenfeld, Germany, on Dec. 24.



Viktoria and Florian Gerss donned medieval German outfits to welcome McMullen and Pfc. Jaheim McLain to their home near the town of Birkenfeld, Germany, on Christmas Eve.

Yokota Air Base makes space for internet service competitor

By JEREMY STILLWAGNER
AND KELLY AGEE

Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — Rakuten Mobile opened its first store on a U.S. military installation in Japan on Friday, giving service members living at this airlift hub in western Tokyo the choice of a second internet service provider.

"This was one of our huge initiatives for 2023, bringing in an alternative internet option for the Yokota community," said Andrew Defelice, general manager of the

Army and Air Force Exchange Service at Yokota, during the store's opening ceremony.

Service members and their families had voiced their dissatisfaction with having only one internet service provider on base, the base commander said at the opening. Rakuten Mobile opened in a space inside the Yokota Community Center. Previously, only Allied Telesis provided internet service to base residents.

"This is an example of how our community gets to speak and gets

to be heard," Col. Andrew Rodan, 374th Airlift Wing commander, said at the business opening. "We got the feedback that they wanted some competition and that they wanted another option."

Rakuten Mobile is part of Rakuten Group Inc., a Japanese technology conglomerate based in Tokyo. Many service members living at Yokota complained that having just one internet provider on base resulted in expensive internet bills.

"The monopoly just means that

they can charge whatever they want, and you have to pay it because the alternative is not having internet at all," Staff Sgt. Boston Postgate, 374th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, told Stars and Stripes by phone Wednesday.

An Allied Telesis manager did not reply to a message seeking comment Friday that was relayed by employees at Yokota on behalf of Stars and Stripes.

Service members voiced their excitement on social media after the exchange on Tuesday an-

nounced the store opening.

"I have honestly been looking forward to a second service provider," Senior Airman Nicolas Hernandez, 374th Security Forces Squadron, told Stars and Stripes in a Facebook message Tuesday. "It would be great competition against Allied Telesis, and I look forward to seeing who has the best offers on hopefully cheaper internet plans."

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MIDEAST

Israel bombards central Gaza as telecom downed

BY NAJIB JOBAIN,
WAFAA SHURAF
AND SAMY MAGDY
Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli forces bombarded Palestinian refugee camps in central Gaza and issued orders telling residents to evacuate Tuesday, signs that the military plans to expand its ground offensive into another part of the besieged territory. Gaza’s main telecom provider, Paltel, announced another “complete interruption” of services.

A potential new battle zone threatens new destruction in a war that Israel’s military has said will last for “many months” as it vows to crush the ruling Hamas militant group after its Oct. 7 attack. Israeli forces have been engaged in heavy urban fighting in northern Gaza and the southern city of Khan Younis, driving Palestinians into ever-smaller areas in search of refuge.

Despite international pressure for a cease-fire and U.S. calls for fewer civilian casualties, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says the fight “isn’t close to finished.”

Israel’s offensive is one of the most devastating military cam-

paigns in recent history. More than 20,900 Palestinians, two-thirds of them women and children, have been killed, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza, whose count doesn’t differentiate between civilians and combatants. On Tuesday afternoon, it said 240 people had been killed over the past 24 hours.

“We are gravely concerned about the continued bombardment of Middle Gaza by Israeli forces, which has claimed more than 100 Palestinian lives since Christmas Eve,” the U.N. human rights office said, noting that Israel had ordered some residents to move to the area.

In response to what it has long considered disproportionate criticism from the U.N., Israel said it would no longer grant automatic visas to U.N. employees and accused the world body of being “complicit partners” in Hamas’ tactics. Government spokesman Eylon Levy said that Israel would consider visa requests case by case. That could further limit aid efforts in Gaza.

Residents of central Gaza described a night of shelling and airstrikes shaking the Nuseirat, Maghazi and Bureij camps. The



LEO CORREA/AP

An Israeli soldier flashes a V-sign from an armored personnel carrier near the Israeli-Gaza border, in southern Israel, on Monday.

camps are built-up towns housing Palestinians driven from their homes in what is now Israel during the 1948 war, along with their descendants. The camps are now crowded with people who fled the north.

“The bombing was very intense,” Radwan Abu Sheitta, a teacher, said by phone from Bureij.

In the afternoon, the Israeli military ordered residents to evacuate a belt of territory the width of central Gaza, including Bureij, urging them to move to nearby Deir al-Balah. Hamas’ military arm, the Qassam Brigades, said its fighters struck two Israeli tanks east of Bureij. Its report couldn’t be independently confirmed, but it suggested Israeli forces were

approaching the camp.

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said Israel faces a “multi-arena war” from seven different fronts — Gaza and the occupied West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Iran. “We have responded and acted already on six of these,” he told the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee.

More than 85% of Gaza’s 2.3 million people have been driven from their homes. Deir al-Balah and Rafah, in the south on the Egyptian border, have been overwhelmed with displaced people, even as Israel bombards them.

U.N. officials say a quarter of Gaza’s population is starving under Israel’s siege, which allows in only a trickle of food, water, fuel,

medicine and other supplies.

A strike Tuesday hit a home in Mawasi, a rural area in the province of Khan Younis that Israel declared a safe zone. One woman was killed and at least eight others were wounded, according to a cameraman working for The Associated Press at the nearby hospital.

In response, Israel’s military said that it wouldn’t refrain from operating in safe zones, “if it identifies terrorist organization activity threatening the security of Israel.”

Last week, the U.N. Security Council called for immediately speeding up aid deliveries to Gaza, but there has been little sign of change. The U.N. says many areas are cut off by fighting.

Strikes: Attacks come amid strain to keep war in Gaza from spilling over

FROM PAGE 1

Biden, who was spending Christmas at the presidential retreat at Camp David, Md., was alerted about the attack by White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan shortly after it occurred Monday and ordered the Pentagon and his top national security aides to prepare response options to the attack on an air base used by American troops in Irbil.

Sullivan consulted with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. Biden’s deputy national security adviser, Jon Finer, was with the president at Camp David and convened top aides to review options, according to a U.S. official, who was not authorized to comment publicly and requested anonymity.

Within hours, Biden convened his national security team for a call in which Austin and Gen. CQ Brown, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, briefed Biden on the response options. Biden opted to target three locations used by Kataib Hezbollah and affiliated groups,

the official said.

The U.S. strikes were carried out at about 4:45 a.m. Tuesday in Iraq, less than 13 hours after the U.S. personnel were attacked. According to U.S. Central Command, the retaliatory strikes on the three sites “destroyed the targeted facilities and likely killed a number of Kataib Hezbollah militants.”

“The President places no higher priority than the protection of American personnel serving in harm’s way,” Watson said. “The United States will act at a time and in a manner of our choosing should these attacks continue.”

The latest attack on U.S. troops follows months of escalating threats and actions against American forces in the region since the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel that sparked the devastating war in Gaza.

The dangerous back-and-forth strikes have escalated since Iranian-backed militant groups under the umbrella group called the Islamic Resistance in Iraq and Sy-

ria began striking U.S. facilities Oct. 17, the date that a blast at a hospital in Gaza killed hundreds. Iranian-backed militias have carried out more than 100 attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria since the start of the Israel-Hamas war more than two months ago.

In November, U.S. fighter jets struck a Kataib Hezbollah operations center and command and control node, following a short-range ballistic missile attack on U.S. forces at al Asad Air Base in western Iraq. Iranian-backed militias also carried out a drone attack at the same air base in October, causing minor injuries.

The U.S. has also blamed Iran, which has funded and trained Hamas, for attacks by Yemen’s Houthi militants against commercial and military vessels through a critical shipping choke point in the Red Sea.

The Biden administration has sought to prevent the Israel-Hamas war from spiraling into a wider regional conflict that either opens up new fronts of Israeli

fighting or draws the U.S. in directly. The administration’s measured response — where not every attempt on American troops has been met with a counterattack — has drawn criticism from Republicans.

The U.S. has thousands of troops in Iraq training Iraqi forces and combating remnants of the Islamic State, and hundreds in Syria, mostly on the counter-ISIS mission. They have come under dozens of attacks, though as yet none fatal, since the war began on Oct. 7, with the U.S. attributing responsibility to Iran-backed groups.

“While we do not seek to escalate conflict in the region, we are committed and fully prepared to take further necessary measures to protect our people and our facilities,” Austin said in a statement.

The clashes put the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani in a delicate position. He came to power in 2022 with the backing of a coalition of Iranian-backed parties,

some of which are associated with the same militias launching the attacks on U.S. bases.

A group of Iranian-backed militias known as the Popular Mobilization Forces were key in the fight against ISIS militants after the extremist group overran much of Iraq in 2014. The PMF is officially under the command of the Iraqi army, but in practice the militias operate independently.

In a statement Tuesday, Sudani condemned both the militia attack in Irbil and the U.S. response.

Attacks on “foreign diplomatic mission headquarters and sites hosting military advisors from friendly nations ... infringe upon Iraq’s sovereignty and are deemed unacceptable under any circumstances,” the statement said.

However, it added that the retaliatory strikes by the U.S. on “Iraqi military sites” — referring to the militia — “constitute a clear hostile act.” Sudani said some of those injured in the strikes were civilians.

WAR IN UKRAINE

Russian navy in
Crimea hit by
Ukrainian strike

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian warplanes damaged a Russian ship moored in the Black Sea off Crimea, both countries said Tuesday, bolstering Ukrainian morale after battlefield disappointments and doubts about the future of Western aid.

The planes fired guided missiles at the landing ship Novocherkassk, which is moored at a base in the city of Feodosia, Russia’s Defense Ministry said. Video on Russian and Ukrainian social media showed an explosion in the port.

Ukrainian authorities claimed the ship was destroyed. They said it was likely carrying ammunition and possibly drones.

The 360-foot Novocherkassk can carry 10 tanks and 225 sailors.

“We saw how powerful the blast and detonation were. It’s extremely difficult for a ship to survive something like that,” Ukrainian air force spokesman Yuriy Ihnat said on U.S.-backed Radio Liberty.

“The Russian fleet has become smaller,” Ukrainian air force Cmdr. Mykola Oleschuk said in a mocking message on the Telegram app. He urged Russians to leave Crimea — which Russia annexed in 2014 — “while it’s not too late.”

Over the last few months, Ukrainian forces have conducted a string of attacks around Crimea, a Black Sea peninsula invaded and illegally annexed by Russia in 2014. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy credits those attacks, mostly with naval drones, with allowing Ukraine to restore navigation in the Black Sea and export of millions of tons of grain.

In September, a Ukrainian attack hit the headquarters of Rus-

sia’s Black Sea Fleet in the Crimean city of Sevastopol, killing one serviceman. Ukraine launched more missiles against the city the following day.

But despite high hopes for a broader Ukrainian summer counteroffensive, the front line barely moved, and political disputes in allied countries have left billions of dollars of aid in doubt.

Showing Ukrainian forces’ difficulties on the battlefield, commander-in-chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi said Tuesday that his troops had retreated to the northern outskirts of the city of Marinka.

Russia said Monday that it had taken Marinka, which sits about 12 miles west of Donetsk, the largest city in Russian-held territory.

Zaluzhnyi told journalists Tuesday that Ukrainian troops had held Marinka for almost two years but Russians “were destroying it street by street, house by house.”

Russia also said Tuesday two Ukrainian fighter jets were destroyed by anti-aircraft fire during the attack. Ihnat, of the Ukrainian air force, denied that.

The Russia-appointed head of Crimea, Sergei Aksyonov, said one person was killed in Tuesday’s attack and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu briefed Russian President Vladimir Putin, according to Russian news agencies that provided no details.

The Ukrainian air force’s Tuesday morning update said that Russia launched 19 drones, mostly against the Odesa and Mykolaiv regions — 13 of which were shot down — over the past night. The remaining drones caused infrastructure damage, but no casualties were reported, according to Ukraine’s presidential office.



Ed Ram/For The Washington Post

A Ukrainian soldier stands near a shell casing at a howitzer position in the Donetsk region on Oct. 23.

Ukrainian troops running low on
shells amid stall in Western aid

By SIOBHÁN O’GRADY,
DAVID L. STERN
AND KOSTIANTYN KHUDOV
The Washington Post

KYIV — Ukrainian forces are suffering from a shortage of artillery shells on the front line, prompting some units to cancel planned assaults, soldiers said this week, and stoking fears over how long Kyiv’s troops will be able to hold their ground against continuing Russian attacks.

The ammunition shortage is deepening the already palpable anxiety in the Ukrainian capital, as U.S. and European aid stalls and winter sets in.

“Our gunners are given a limit of shells for each target,” said a member of the 128th Mountain Assault Brigade, which is fighting in the southeastern Zaporizhzhia region.

“If the target there is smaller — for example, a mortar position — then they give five or seven shells in total,” he said, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject.

“The guys are tired — very

tired,” he said. “They are still motivated — many people understand that they have no other choice.”

“But you can’t win a war only on motivation,” he continued. “You should have some kind of a numerical advantage, and with the weapons and weapons systems, it only gets worse and worse. How long can we last? It’s hard to say, but it can’t be long. Everyone understands this.”

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy confirmed the current shortage during his year-end news conference this week, though he insisted that the military was holding strong.

Earlier this month, Zelenskyy visited Washington, where he pleaded for lawmakers to free up \$60 billion in aid that President Joe Biden has proposed for Ukraine. No deal came through, however, as Republicans tied the aid to controversial border security measures. Days later, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban blocked \$55 billion in European Union assistance to Uk-

raine.

The United States is Ukraine’s most important ally and Zelenskyy told reporters this week that he is “sure the U.S.A. won’t betray us.”

But Biden’s failure to secure the urgently needed funding for Ukraine before the end of the year showed that the White House simply cannot ensure everlasting support.

Biden, who previously insisted the United States would stand by Ukraine for “as long as it takes,” instead said earlier this month that it will support Kyiv for “as long as we can.”

The Biden administration has warned that barring passage of a supplemental spending bill, there is only enough money left to replenish U.S. stocks and deliver one remaining aid package.

“Once these funds are obligated, the department will have exhausted the funding available to us for security assistance to Ukraine,” Pentagon Comptroller Michael McCord said in a Dec. 15 letter to Congress.

Netherlands moves toward donating 18 F-16s to Ukraine

Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — The Dutch government announced Friday it is preparing to give 18 F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine, in a boost for the embattled nation that is growing increasingly anxious about aid from its Western allies.

The Dutch defense minister, Kajsa Ollongren, sent a letter to parliament outlining the plan to donate the sophisticated jets that were first unveiled in the summer.

Friday’s decision is a significant

step toward sending the planes into the skies over Ukraine, but did not say when they will be delivered.

The government said the move “allows personnel and budget to be allocated to prepare the devices” to be sent to Ukraine.

“With F-16s, Ukraine can better defend itself against Russian attacks,” Ollongren said in a statement. She added that the planes are “extremely important because the ongoing Russian aggression shows no sign of ending.

That is why we are continuing unabated with our support for Ukraine.”

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited a military airbase in the southern Dutch city of Eindhoven in August to inspect two of the jets on the day that the Netherlands and Denmark said they would donate planes to boost the Ukrainian war effort.

Last month, Romania inaugurated an international training hub for F-16 jet pilots from allied countries and other partners, in-

cluding Ukraine. The training facility at an air base in southeast Romania will aim to increase interoperability between NATO allies, and better position the military alliance “to face the complex challenges” in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region, Romania’s defense ministry said.

Romania said at the time that the powerful U.S.-made warplanes would be supplied by the Dutch air force while the aircraft maker Lockheed Martin would provide instructors and mainte-

nance at the training center.

The Dutch government said Friday it still has to decide whether to grant an export permit for the planes “to prevent undesirable end use.” The foreign ministry will make the assessment based on European Union weapon export rules.

Ukrainian pilots must have completed F-16 training before the jets can be delivered and infrastructure in Ukraine also must be prepared for the planes, the government added.

WAR IN UKRAINE

Missions: Forces one of few counteroffensive successes

FROM PAGE 1

edge, some almost within view of the Kakhovka Dam. They were within range of the Russian forces who had controlled the dam and land across the Dnieper since the first days after the February 2022 full-scale invasion. And both sides knew Ukraine's looming counteroffensive had its sights on control of the river as the key to reclaim the occupied south.

In the operation's opening days, on June 6, an explosion destroyed the dam, sending a wall of reservoir water downstream, killing untold numbers of civilians, and washing out the Ukrainian army positions.

"We were ready to cross. And then the dam blew up," Skif said. The water rose 20 meters, submerging supply lines, the Russian positions and everything else in its path for hundreds of kilometers. The race was on: Whose forces could seize the islands when the waters receded, and with them full control of the Dnieper?

For most Ukrainians who see them on the streets in the nearly deserted frontline villages of the Kherson region, they are the guys in T-shirts and flip-flops — just regular people. The locals who refused to evacuate have all become accustomed to the sounds of war, so even their unnerving calm in the face of air raid alarms, nearby gunfire and artillery doesn't seem unusual.

AP joined one of the clandestine units several times over six months along the Dnieper. The frogmen are nocturnal. They transform themselves from nondescript civilians into elite fighters, some in wetsuits and some in boats. In the morning, when their operations end, they're back to anonymity.

They rarely take credit for their work and Ukrainians rarely learn about their operations. But Russian military statements gleefully and erroneously announcing the destruction of Center 73 are an indication of their effectiveness.

June

The men had the most modern equipment, night-vision goggles, waterproof rifles that can be assembled in a matter of seconds, underwater breathing apparatus that produces no surface bubbles, and cloaks that hide their heat signature during nighttime raids.

It was a matter of days before the start of the counteroffensive, and Center 73 had already located the Russian positions they would seize on the Dnieper River islands. Skif's men were within earshot of the June 6 explosion that destroyed the Kakhovka Dam, flooded vast stretches of the Kherson region, and upended Skif's attack plan. An AP investigation found Russian forces had the



FELIPE DANA/AP

A Ukraine Special Operations Forces soldier walks through water on the shores of the Dnieper River using night vision goggles during a mission in Kherson region, Ukraine, in June 1.

means, motive and opportunity to blow up the dam.

Both the Russians and Ukrainians retreated from the river to regroup — Russians to the south and Ukrainians to the north.

Abandoned homes, clubs, shops became headquarters, with banks of computer screens filling the rooms and improvised weapons workshops nearby. Always secretive, frequently changing locations, they meticulously plan every operation, they sleep only a few hours during the day with curtains closed.

They wake around sunset, load gear into a 4X4 and drive to a different point on the riverbank to scout new routes for a counteroffensive, provoke Russian forces into shooting at them to pinpoint the enemy's location, retrieve soggy caches of supplies with their boat. Periodically, they captured a Russian soldier stuck in a tree or found a clutch of landmines washed up on shore.

And they themselves were stuck. Other special forces took part in battles in eastern Ukraine, the other main front in the counteroffensive. Skif's men waited patiently for the water to subside so they could seize positions and lay the groundwork for the arrival of infantry and marines in the Kherson region.

Skif, a veteran of the 2022 battle for Mariupol who had survived 266 days as a prisoner of war, wanted to fight. He had been part of Center 73 before Mariupol and rejoined after he was freed in a POW exchange.

Ukraine created its special forces in response to Russia's light-

ning-fast annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas in 2014, a precursor to the wide-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

"We realized that we were much smaller in terms of number than our enemy," said Oleksandr Kindratenko, a press officer for Special Operations Forces. "The emphasis was placed on quality. These were supposed to be small groups performing operational or strategic tasks."

He said they were trained and equipped in part by Europeans, including those from NATO countries, but their own recent battle experience means they are now as much teachers as students.

Tasks that the unit considers routine — scouting as close to Russians as possible, planting explosives under their noses, underwater operations — most soldiers would consider high-risk. High-risk missions are practically a death wish.

Skif knew he first had to plan and persuade the generals that if his men could secure a bridgehead — a strategic crossing point — it would be worthwhile to send troops. And that would mean high-risk river missions.

"My phone book is a little graveyard," he said. "A lot of good, decent people are dead. They were killed on the battlefield. One burned to death in an armored truck. One was shot by howitzers. Somebody stepped on a landmine. Everyone died differently, and there are so many of them."

July to August

The water retreated in July. The

Russians and Ukrainians advanced again toward the river from opposite directions, the Russians from the south and Ukrainians from the north.

Groups of Center 73 scouted and advanced along the river. The mission for Skif's unit was to reclaim an island near the dam, now a web of cracked mud and dead trees. Their network of spies in the Kherson region, as well as drones and satellite images, told them where Russian forces had repositioned.

They disembarked the boats and moved in, walking through the bare branches of the forest through swarms of mosquitoes so loud their bodycam picked up the sound.

One of the men tripped a wire connected to a grenade and flung himself as far as he could away from the Russian explosive.

Just as the shrapnel pierced his back, mayhem broke out. The injured Ukrainian crawled toward the unit's waiting boat 2 miles away, as the Russian troops who set the boobytrap rained gunfire on them.

Skif's men made it to the boat, which sprang a leak, and retreated back to their side of the Dnieper. Russians established their position on the island, and it took weeks more for the Ukrainians to expel them.

Then new orders came. Go upstream and breach Russian defenses beneath a destroyed railway bridge.

The men had an often-underestimated advantage over their Russian enemy: Many Ukrainians grow up bilingual and understand Russian communications intercepted in real time, while Russian soldiers need a translator for Ukrainian.

So when Skif's unit started picking up Russian radio communications by the railway bridge, they immediately grasped how many men they were up against and the kind of munitions they would face. They made the crossing, avoided the Russians, and waited for backup.

That's when their advantage evaporated. In a single battle, the Russians sent Iskander missiles and dozens of drones, dropping hundreds of grenades.

"In the air, they had absolute dominance compared to us and they held the ground," he said.

The backup was nowhere near enough. Ukrainian forces retreated under heavy fire. More men out of commission and another difficult task ahead.

September to October

A lucky thing happened soon after that battle. A Russian officer who claimed he'd been opposed to the war since its beginning was sent to the front in Kherson. It was, he later said, every bit as bad as

he'd feared.

He made contact with Ukrainian intelligence and said he had 11 comrades who felt similarly. The group surrendered to Skif and his men.

The Russians told Skif exactly what he needed to know about their unit on the island they were now tasked with taking, just outside the village of Krynky.

He was sure he could take the island and more with 20 experienced men. But not without the promise of sufficient backup so Ukrainian regular forces could hold the territory. Fine, his commander said. He'd get the backup — if he returned with footage of his unit in the village hoisting the Ukrainian flag.

And that's how, in mid-October, a Ukrainian drone carrying the national blue and yellow flag came to fly above Krynky at just the moment Skif and his men made their way to the occupied village across the river.

They got their photo op to prove the road was cleared, sent it to the military headquarters, and established the bridgehead.

November to December

Multiple Ukrainian brigades were sent to hold the position and have been there ever since.

But nighttime temperatures are dipping well below freezing, and Ukrainian forces are vastly under-equipped compared to the Russians nearby. Holding and advancing in winter is much harder on soldiers' bodies and their morale.

In recent weeks, Russia has sent waves of glide bombs — essentially enormous munitions retrofitted with gliding apparatus to allow them to be launched from dozens of miles away, as well as swarms of grenade-launching drones and Chinese all-terrain vehicles, according to the Institute for the Study of War and the Hudson Institute, two American think-tanks analyzing open-source footage from the area.

In a news conference earlier this month, Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed the battle and acknowledged Russian forces had pulled back "several meters."

But he insisted Ukrainian forces were battling pointlessly and losing far more than they gained.

"I don't even know why they're doing this," Putin said.

Despite having never fully controlled the territory during the six-month counteroffensive, Russia claims it as its own.

And Ukrainian forces and Center 73 keep fighting into the new year.

"This is our work," Skif said. "No one knows about it, no one talks about it, and we do it with little reward except to benefit our country."

NATION

Officials push to get kids vaccinated amid opt-outs

By DEVI SHASTRI
Associated Press

When Idaho had a rare measles outbreak a few months ago, health officials scrambled to keep it from spreading. In the end, 10 people, all in one family, were infected, all unvaccinated.

This time, the state was lucky, said the region's medical director Dr. Perry Jansen. The family quickly quarantined and the children were already taught at home.

In Idaho last year, parents opted out of state-required vaccines for 12% of kids entering kindergarten, the highest rate in the nation.

"We tend to forget that diseases like measles and polio used to kill people," said Jansen, medical director of the Southwest District Health Department, which handled the outbreak in September.

All states require children to have certain routine vaccines to go to public school, and often private school and day care, to prevent outbreaks of once-common childhood diseases like measles, mumps, whooping cough, chickenpox and polio. All provide exemptions for children who have a medical reason for avoiding the shots. Most also offer waivers for religious beliefs. Fifteen allow a waiver for any personal

belief.

Last school year, vaccination waivers among kindergartners hit an all-time high: 3% in total, according to a recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report. Waivers for religious or personal beliefs have been on the rise, driven by some states loosening laws, in others by vaccine misinformation and political rhetoric amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Idaho, "a parent only has to provide a signed statement," to get a waiver, the state's health department said. A change in state law before the 2018-19 school year made it easier to get waivers. The state's exemption rate that year was 7.7%.

September's measles outbreak started when a resident of Nampa, the state's third largest city, returned home from a trip abroad. Measles is usually brought into the U.S. through travel since widespread vaccination has all but eliminated local spread of the disease.

It takes a very high level of vaccination — around 95% — to protect against the spread of measles and other diseases, experts say. During the pandemic, the national rate for vaccinations among kindergartners dropped to 93%.

Health experts say interventions

on every level are needed to get more kids immunized: doctors talking to parents, social media campaigns, easier access to vaccines in some areas, enforcement by schools in others.

Last year, most states had an increase in waivers. Hawaii, which allows medical and religious waivers, saw rates double from the previous school year. Nearly 6.5% of kindergartners have an exemption for at least one required vaccine.

It's impossible to know the reasons behind a waiver, said Ronald Balajadia, immunization program manager for Hawaii State Department of Health. But misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines "has bled through to routine vaccines where normally people would have not had a question about," Balajadia said.

While some states have made it easier to opt out, others have clamped down. Connecticut eliminated its long-standing religious waiver for vaccinations in 2021, joining California, West Virginia, New York and Maine in allowing only medical exemptions. The change drew protests and lawsuits. With only a medical waiver now, the kindergarten vaccination rate reached 97% or above last year; waiver rates dropped to less than 1%.



MARK MIRKO, HARTFORD (CONN.) COURANT/AP

Opponents of a bill to repeal Connecticut's religious exemption for required school vaccinations march before the state Senate voted on legislation on April 27, 2021, in Hartford. Connecticut now only allows medical exemptions for the required school vaccinations.

The state is still working to get more parents on board by answering their questions "and not just dismiss them. It's our best shot at trying to bring people along," said Dr. Manisha Juthani, commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Public Health.

Georgia had the second largest drop in vaccine waivers last year — from 4.7% to 3.8%. State health officials cited a steady post-pandemic return to partnerships between schools, public health and pediatri-

cians as possible reasons for the improvement.

Dr. Angela Highbaugh-Battle has cared for kids in rural Georgia for 17 years, now in the small coastal community of St. Mary's. She said she spends more time now talking to parents wary about routine childhood vaccines.

Every connection, every conversation, is a chance to educate, she said.

"It's not about winning or losing," she said.

Study: AI image-generators being trained on explicit photos of children

By MATT O'BRIEN
AND HALELUYA HADERO
Associated Press

Hidden inside the foundation of popular artificial intelligence image-generators are thousands of images of child sexual abuse, according to a new report that urges companies to take action to address a harmful flaw in the technology they built.

Those same images have made it easier for AI systems to produce realistic and explicit imagery of fake children as well as transform social media photos of fully clothed real teens into nudes, much to the alarm of schools and law enforcement around the world.

Until recently, anti-abuse researchers thought the only way that some unchecked AI tools produced abusive imagery of children was by essentially combining what they've learned from two separate buckets of online images — adult pornography and benign photos of kids.

But the Stanford Internet Observatory found more than 3,200 images of suspected child sexual abuse in the giant AI database LAION, an index of online images and captions that's been used to train leading AI image-makers such as Stable Diffusion. The watchdog



CAMILLA MENDES DOS SANTOS/AP

Stanford Internet Observatory's David Thiel authored its report that discovered images of child sexual abuse in the data used to train artificial intelligence image-generators.

group based at Stanford University worked with the Canadian Centre for Child Protection and other anti-abuse charities to identify the illegal material and report the original photo links to law enforcement. It said roughly 1,000 of the images it found were externally validated.

The response was immediate. On the eve of the Dec. 20 release of the Stanford Internet Observatory's report, LAION told The Associated Press it was temporarily removing its datasets.

LAION, which stands for the non-profit Large-scale Artificial Intelligence Open Network, said in a state-

ment that it "has a zero tolerance policy for illegal content and in an abundance of caution, we have taken down the LAION datasets to ensure they are safe before republishing them."

While the images account for just a fraction of LAION's index of some 5.8 billion images, the Stanford group says it is likely influencing the ability of AI tools to generate harmful outputs and reinforcing the prior abuse of real victims who appear multiple times.

It's not an easy problem to fix, and traces back to many generative AI projects being "effectively rushed to market" and made widely accessible because the field is so competitive, said Stanford Internet Observatory's chief technologist David Thiel, who authored the report.

"Taking an entire internet-wide scrape and making that dataset to train models is something that should have been confined to a research operation, if anything, and is not something that should have been open-sourced without a lot more rigorous attention," Thiel said in an interview.

A prominent LAION user that helped shape the dataset's development is London-based startup Stability AI, maker of the Stable Diffu-

sion text-to-image models. New versions of Stable Diffusion have made it much harder to create harmful content, but an older version introduced last year — which Stability AI says it didn't release — is still baked into other applications and tools and remains "the most popular model for generating explicit imagery," according to the Stanford report.

"We can't take that back. That model is in the hands of many people on their local machines," said Lloyd Richardson, director of information technology at the Canadian Centre for Child Protection, which runs Canada's hotline for reporting online sexual exploitation.

Stability AI said last week that it only hosts filtered versions of Stable Diffusion and that "since taking over the exclusive development of Stable Diffusion, Stability AI has taken proactive steps to mitigate the risk of misuse."

"Those filters remove unsafe content from reaching the models," the company said in a prepared statement. "By removing that content before it ever reaches the model, we can help to prevent the model from generating unsafe content."

LAION was the brainchild of a German researcher and teacher, Christoph Schuhmann, who told the

AP earlier this year that part of the reason to make such a huge visual database publicly accessible was to ensure that the future of AI development isn't controlled by a handful of powerful companies.

"It will be much safer and much more fair if we can democratize it so that the whole research community and the whole general public can benefit from it," he said.

Rebecca Portnoff, the director of data science at the anti-child sexual abuse organization Thorn, said her organization has conducted research that shows the prevalence of AI-generated images among abusers is small, but growing consistently.

Developers can mitigate these harms by making sure the datasets they use to develop AI models are clean of abuse materials. Portnoff said tech companies and child safety groups currently assign videos and images a "hash" — unique digital signatures — to track and take down child abuse materials. The same concept can be applied to AI models that are being misused, she said.

"It's not currently happening," she said. "But it's something that in my opinion can and should be done."

TECHNOLOGY

Keeping the humanoid spirit alive

Some AI firms still working, struggling to perfect robots

BY MATT O'BRIEN
Associated Press

Building a robot that's both human-like and useful is a decades-old engineering dream inspired by popular science fiction.

While the latest artificial intelligence craze has sparked another wave of investments in the quest to build a humanoid, most of the current prototypes are clumsy and impractical, looking better in staged performances than in real life. That hasn't stopped a handful of startups from keeping at it.

"The intention is not to start from the beginning and say, 'Hey, we're trying to make a robot look like a person,'" said Jonathan Hurst, co-founder and chief robot officer at Agility Robotics. "We're trying to make robots that can operate in human spaces."

Do we even need humanoids? Hurst makes a point of describing Agility's warehouse robot Digit as human-centric, not humanoid, a distinction meant to emphasize what it does over what it's trying to be.

What it does, for now, is pick up tote bins and move them. Amazon announced in October it will begin testing Digits for use in its warehouses, and Agility opened an Oregon factory in September to mass produce them.

Digit has a head containing cameras, other sensors and animated eyes, and a torso that essentially works as its engine. It has two arms and two legs, but its legs are more bird-like than human, with an inverted knees appearance that resembles so-called digitigrade animals such as birds, cats and dogs that walk on their toes rather than on flat feet.

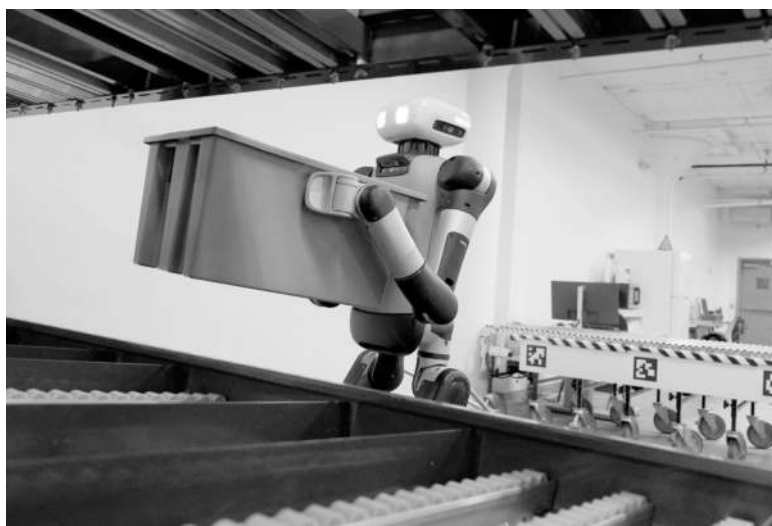
Rival robot-makers, like Figure AI, are taking a more purist approach on the idea that only true humanoids can effectively navigate workplaces, homes and a society built for humans. Figure also plans to start with a relatively simple use case, such as in a retail warehouse, but aims for a commercial robot that can be "iterated on like an iPhone" to perform multiple tasks to take up the work of humans as birth rates decline around the world.

"There's not enough people doing these jobs, so the market's massive," said Figure AI CEO Brett Adcock. "If we can just get



PHOTOS BY JAE C. HONG/AP

Joel Carrasco performs maintenance on humanoid robot Figure 01 at Figure AI's test facility in Sunnyvale, Calif., on Oct. 3.



MATT FREED/AP

Agility Robotics' warehouse robot Digit performs maneuvers at the company's office in Pittsburgh, on Aug. 16.

humanoids to do work that humans are not wanting to do because there's a shortfall of humans, we can sell millions of humanoids, billions maybe."

At the moment, however, Adcock's firm doesn't have a prototype that's ready for market. Founded just over a year ago and after having raised tens of millions of dollars, it recently revealed a 38-second video of Figure walking through its test facility in Sunnyvale, Calif.

Tesla CEO Elon Musk is also trying to build a humanoid, called Optimus, through the electric carmaker's robotics division, but a hyped-up live demonstration last year of the robot's awkwardly

halting steps didn't impress experts in the robotics field. Seemingly farther along is Tesla's Austin, Texas-based neighbor Apptronik, which unveiled its Apollo humanoid in an August video demonstration.

All the attention — and money — poured into making ungainly humanoid machines might make the whole enterprise seem like a futile hobby for wealthy technologists, but for some pioneers of legged robots it's all about what you learn along the way.

"Not only about their design and operation, but also about how people respond to them, and about the critical underlying technologies for mobility, dexterity, perception



Figure AI CEO Brett Adcock sits for a photo at the company's test facility in Sunnyvale, Calif.

and intelligence," said Marc Raibert, the co-founder of Boston Dynamics, best known for its dog-like robots named Spot.

Raibert said sometimes the path of development is not along a straight line. Boston Dynamics, now a subsidiary of carmaker Hyundai, experimented with building a humanoid that could handle boxes.

"That led to development of a new robot that was not really a humanoid, but had several characteristics of a humanoid," he said via an emailed message. "But the changes resulted in a new robot that could handle boxes faster, could work longer hours, and could operate in tight spaces, such

as a truck. So humanoid research led to a useful non-humanoid robot."

Some startups aiming for human-like machines focused on improving the dexterity of robotic fingers before trying to get their robots to walk.

Walking is "not the hardest problem to solve in humanoid robotics," said Geordie Rose, co-founder and CEO of British Columbia, Canada-based startup Sanctuary AI. "The hardest problem is the problem of understanding the world and being able to manipulate it with your hands."

Sanctuary's newest and first bipedal robot, Phoenix, can stock shelves, unload delivery vehicles and operate a checkout, early steps toward what Rose sees as a much longer-term goal of getting robots to perceive the physical world to be able to reason about it in a way that resembles intelligence. Like other humanoids, it's meant to look endearing, because how it interacts with real people is a big part of its function.

"We want to be able to provide labor to the world, not just for one thing, but for everybody who needs it," Rose said. "The systems have to be able to think like people. So we could call that artificial general intelligence if you'd like. But what I mean more specifically is the systems have to be able to understand speech and they need to be able to convert the understanding of speech into action, which will satisfy job roles across the entire economy."

Agility's Digit robot caught Amazon's attention because it can walk and also move around in a way that could complement the e-commerce giant's existing fleet of vehicle-like robots that move large carts around its warehouses.

"The mobility aspect is more interesting than the actual form," said Tye Brady, Amazon's chief technologist for robotics, after the company showed it off at a media event in Seattle.

Right now, Digit is being tested to help with the repetitive task of picking up and moving empty totes. But just having it there is bound to resurrect some fears about robots taking people's jobs, a narrative Amazon is trying to prevent from taking hold.

Agility Robotics co-founder and CEO Damion Shelton said the warehouse robot is "just the first use case" of a new generation of robots he hopes will be embraced rather than feared as they prepare to enter businesses and homes.

"So in 10, 20 years, you're going to see these robots everywhere," Shelton said. "Forever more, human-centric robots like that are going to be part of human life. So that's pretty exciting."

WORLD



Afghan girls attend a religious school, which remained open since the Taliban takeover, in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 2022.

EBRAHIM NOROOZI/AP

Afghan girls finished with school after sixth grade due to Taliban rule

By MOHAMMAD HABIB RAHMANI
Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — Bahara Rustam, 13, took her last class at Bibi Razia School in Kabul on Dec. 11 knowing it was the end of her education. Under Taliban rule, she is unlikely to step foot in a classroom again.

In September 2021, a month after U.S. and NATO troops withdrew from Afghanistan following two decades of war, the Taliban announced that girls were barred from studying beyond sixth grade.

They extended this education ban to universities in December 2022. The Taliban have defied global condemnation and warnings that the restrictions will make it almost impossible for them to gain recognition as the country's

legitimate rulers.

Last week, U.N. special envoy Roza Otunbayeva expressed concern that a generation of Afghan girls is falling behind with each day that passes.

Last week, an official in the Education Ministry said Afghan girls of all ages are allowed to study in religious schools known as madrassas, which have traditionally been boys-only.

But Otunbayeva said it was unclear if there was a standardized curriculum that allowed modern subjects.

Bahara is holding onto her education and pores over textbooks at home. "Graduating (from sixth grade) means we are going to seventh grade," she said. "But all of our classmates cried and we were very disappointed."

There was no graduation ceremony for the girls at Bibi Razia School.

In another part of Kabul, 13-year old Setayesh Sahibzada wonders what the future holds for her. She is sad she can't go to school anymore to achieve her dreams.

"I can't stand on my own two feet," she said. "I wanted to be a teacher. But now I can't study, I can't go to school."

Analyst Muhammad Saleem Paigir warned that excluding women and girls from education will be disastrous for Afghanistan. "We understand that illiterate people can never be free and prosperous," he said.

The Taliban have barred women from many public spaces and most jobs, all but confining women to their homes.

Belarus president says Russian nuclear shipments completed

Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia — The president of Belarus said Monday that Russia has completed its shipments of tactical nuclear weapons to his country, an initiative that raised strong concerns in neighboring Poland and elsewhere in the region.

President Alexander Lukashenko said at a meeting of a Moscow-led economic bloc in St. Petersburg that the shipments were completed in October, but he did not give details of how many weapons were sent or where they have been deployed.

Tactical nuclear weapons, which are intended for use on the battlefield, have a short range and

a low yield compared with much more powerful nuclear warheads fitted to long-range missiles. Russia said it would maintain control over those it sends to Belarus.

Lukashenko has said that hosting Russian nuclear weapons in his country is meant to deter aggression by Poland, a NATO member. Poland is offering neighbor Ukraine military, humanitarian and political backing in its struggle against Russia's invasion and is taking part in international sanctions on Russia and Belarus.

Russian troops based in Belarus invaded Ukraine from the north in the war's opening days, but Belarusian forces are not known to have participated.

Report: Iran increasing production of uranium

Associated Press

VIENNA — Iran has increased the rate at which it is producing near weapons grade uranium in recent weeks, reversing a previous slowdown that started in the middle of this year, the International Atomic Energy Agency said in a report to member states.

Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi said in the report that Iran "in recent weeks had increased its production of highly enriched uranium, reversing a previous output reduction from mid-2023," according to an IAEA spokesperson Sunday.

Iran had previously slowed down the rate at which it was enriching uranium to 60% purity. Uranium enriched at 60% purity is just a short, technical step away from weapons-grade levels of 90%.

The U.N. nuclear watchdog said its inspectors had verified the increased rate of production since the end of November at facilities in Natanz and Fordow to about 9 kilograms per month, up from 3 kilograms per month since June and representing a return to earlier levels of production.

Indians stuck in airport for days due to trafficking probe arrive in India

Associated Press

MUMBAI, India — A charter plane that was grounded in France for a human trafficking investigation arrived in India with 276 Indians aboard Tuesday, authorities said. The passengers had been heading to Nicaragua but were instead blocked inside a ru-

ral French airport for four days in an exceptional holiday ordeal.

Upon arrival in Mumbai, the passengers filed out of the airport without speaking publicly about what they'd been through or where they would go next. Carrying backpacks or small suitcases, some wore hoods or masks to con-

ceal their identities.

A total of 303 passengers had originally boarded the Legend Airlines A340 plane last week in Fujairah airport in the United Arab Emirates for a flight to Managua, Nicaragua. When the plane stopped in France's Vatry Airport in Champagne country for refuel-

ing Thursday, it was grounded by police based on an anonymous tip that it could be carrying human trafficking victims.

The Vatry airport was requisitioned by police for days. Local officials, medics and volunteers installed cots and ensured regular meals and showers for those held

inside. Then it turned into a makeshift courtroom Sunday as judges, lawyers and interpreters filled the terminal to carry out emergency hearings to determine the next steps.

The plane was authorized to leave Monday and took off for Mumbai.

Exploring the Beauty of the Pacific

Pick up the magazine or get it online

STARS AND STRIPES

BUSINESS

What happens to gift cards that go unspent each year

By DEE-ANN DURBIN
Associated Press

Gift cards make great stocking stuffers — just as long as you don't stuff them in a drawer and forget about them after the holidays.

Americans are expected to spend nearly \$30 billion on gift cards this holiday season, according to the National Retail Federation. Restaurant gift cards are the most popular, making up one-third of those sales.

Most of those gift cards will be redeemed. Paytronix, which tracks restaurant gift card sales, says around 70% of gift cards are used within six months.

But many cards — tens of billions of dollars worth — wind up forgotten or otherwise unused. That's when the life of a gift card gets more complicated, with expiration dates or inactivity fees that can vary by state.

Here's what to know about the gift cards you're giving — or getting:

Loved, but lost

After clothing, gift cards will be the most popular present this holi-



RICHARD DREW/AP

Gift cards are displayed at a Target store, in New York just before Christmas.

day season. Nearly half of Americans plan to give them, according to the National Retail Federation.

But many will remain unspent.

Gift cards get lost or forgotten, or recipients hang on to them for a special occasion. In a July survey, the consumer finance company Bankrate found that 47% of U.S. adults had at least one unspent gift card or voucher. The average value of unused gift cards is \$187 per person, a total of \$23 billion.

The gift of time

Under a federal law that went into effect in 2010, a gift card can't

expire for five years from the time it was purchased or from the last time someone added money to it. Some state laws require an even longer period. In New York, for instance, any gift card purchased after Dec. 10, 2022, can't expire for nine years.

Differing state laws are one reason many stores have stopped using expiration dates altogether, says Ted Rossman, a senior industry analyst at Bankrate.

Use it or lose it

While it may take gift cards years to expire, experts say it's still wise to spend them quickly. Some cards — especially generic cash cards from Visa or MasterCard — will start accruing inactivity fees if they're not used for a year, which eats away at their value. Inflation also makes cards less valuable over time. And if a retail store closes or goes bankrupt, a gift card could be worthless.

Perhaps consider clearing out your stash on National Use Your Gift Card Day, a five-year-old holiday created by a public relations executive and now backed by mul-

tiples retailers. The next one is Jan. 20, 2024.

Or sell it

If you have a gift card you don't want, one option is to sell it on a site like CardCash or Raise. Rossman says resale sites won't give you face value for your cards, but they will typically give 70 to 80 cents per dollar.

Money trail

What happens to the money when a gift card goes unused? It depends on the state where the retailer is incorporated.

When you buy a gift card, a retailer can use that money right away. But it also becomes a liability; the retailer has to plan for the possibility that the gift card will be redeemed.

Every year, big companies calculate "breakage," which is the amount of gift card liability they believe won't be redeemed based on historical averages. For some companies, like Seattle-based Starbucks, breakage is a huge profit-driver. Starbucks reported \$212 million in revenue from

breakage in 2022.

But in at least 19 states retailers must work with state unclaimed property programs to return money from unspent gift cards to consumers. Money that isn't recovered by individual consumers is spent on public service initiatives; in the states' view, it shouldn't go to companies because they haven't provided a service to earn it.

Claim it

All 50 states and the District of Columbia have unclaimed property programs. Combined, they return around \$3 billion to consumers annually, says Misha Werschkul, the executive director of the Washington State Budget and Policy Center.

Werschkul says it can be tricky to find the holders of unspent gift cards, but the growing number of digital cards that name the recipient helps. State unclaimed property offices jointly run the website MissingMoney.com, where consumers can search by name for any unclaimed property they're owed, including cash from gift cards.

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AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Dogs, cats can no longer be sold at pet stores

NV LAS VEGAS — Clark County pet stores can no longer sell dogs, cats, rabbits or potbellied pigs after an ordinance went into place last week.

The Clark County Commission last December voted to ban the sale of the small animals. As part of the ordinance, affected businesses had a year to transition to another business model.

Following the transition period, the ordinance went into place on Dec. 20.

Lawmakers said the ordinance aimed to regulate the sale of the popular pets, take on black market sales and help relieve packed animal shelters, the RJ reported previously. Each illegal sale would incur a \$500 minimum fine, according to the ordinance.

GOP proposal to legalize medical pot coming soon

WI MADISON — Wisconsin Republicans plan to unveil a proposal soon to legalize medical marijuana in the state and could vote on it sometime in 2024, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos said.

Republicans have been working behind closed doors for years on a medical marijuana bill. Along the way, they have rejected calls from Gov. Tony Evers and other Democrats to legalize all uses of marijuana, including medical and recreational.

Vos said last week the proposal will be limited and modeled after the medical marijuana law that had been in place in neighboring Minnesota before it moved to full legalization.

“It is not going to be widespread,” he said. “We are not going to have dispensaries on every corner in every city.”

He said Assembly Republicans are on board in concept, but no one has seen the actual proposal yet. He expected to unveil it in January.

Convict ruled innocent after 50 years in prison

OK OKLAHOMA CITY — An Oklahoma judge has exonerated a man who spent nearly 50 years in prison for murder, the longest serving inmate to be declared innocent of a crime.

Glynn Simmons, 71, who was released in July after prosecutors agreed that key evidence in his case was not turned over to his defense lawyers, was ruled innocent Tuesday.

“This court finds by clear and convincing evidence that the offense for which Mr. Simmons was convicted, sentenced and imprisoned... was not committed by Mr. Simmons,” according to the ruling by Oklahoma County District Judge Amy Palumbo.

Simmons served 48 years, one month and 18 days since his conviction, making him the longest



DAVID ZALUBOWSKI / AP

Astro art

An artist works on a mural on the side of a building at 20th and Sherman Street during a warm streak in Denver last week.

imprisoned U.S. inmate to be exonerated, according to data kept by The National Registry of Exonerations.

Simmons said afterward that he feels vindicated after his time in prison that included initially being sentenced to death row.

“It’s a lesson in resilience and tenacity,” Simmons said during a brief news conference following the ruling. “Don’t let nobody tell you that it (exoneration) can’t happen, because it really can.”

Simmons has maintained his innocence, saying he was in Louisiana at the time of the 1974 slaying of Carolyn Sue Rogers inside an Edmond liquor store.

Man sentenced over video of monkey torture

WI MADISON — A southwestern Wisconsin man was sentenced Wednesday to a year and a day in prison for causing the creation and distribution of a video of a monkey being tortured.

U.S. District Judge William M. Conley also fined Kenneth Herrera, 40, of Soldiers Grove \$5,000 and ordered him to serve three years of supervised release following his prison sentence.

Herrera was cited under the Preventing Animal Cruelty and Torture Act, which makes it illegal to cause the creation or distribution of depictions of “animal

crushing.” Animal crushing includes burning, suffocating, impaling or causing the serious bodily injury of animals, prosecutors said.

Herrera pleaded guilty to the charge on Sept. 15.

Federal agents found evidence that Herrera in December 2021 sent money to a videographer in Indonesia in exchange for a video of a monkey being physically abused, prosecutors said. The videographer sent the video to Herrera via an encrypted messaging application.

Wind farm likely to ‘adversely affect’ whales

NJ ATLANTIC CITY — The lone remaining offshore wind project in New Jersey with preliminary approval is likely to “adversely affect” whales and other marine mammals, but its construction, operation and eventual dismantling will not seriously harm or kill them, a federal scientific agency said.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said the Atlantic Shores project, to be built off the state’s southern coast, is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any species of endangered whales, sea turtles, or fish.

Nor is it anticipated to destroy or adversely modify any designated critical habitat, the agency

said.

Judge rules school board districts illegally drawn

GA ATLANTA — A federal judge has ruled that school board districts in Georgia’s second-largest school system appear to be unconstitutionally discriminatory and must be quickly redrawn ahead of 2024’s elections.

U.S. District Judge Eleanor Ross forbade the Cobb County school district from using a map supported by the current board’s four Republican members, finding in an preliminary injunction that the map is “substantially likely to be an unconstitutional racial gerrymander.”

After Ross’ ruling, the Cobb County district asked the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to step in and set the order aside, saying the district has been unfairly excluded from the litigation.

Ross ordered state lawmakers to draw a new map by Jan. 10, which will be unlikely unless Gov. Brian Kemp orders a special session. Lawmakers don’t convene until Jan. 8 and normal legislative rules don’t allow a bill to pass in three days.

Recycled wastewater a step closer to faucets

CA SACRAMENTO — When a toilet is flushed

in California, the water can end up in a lot of places: An ice skating rink near Disneyland, ski slopes around Lake Tahoe, farmland in the Central Valley.

And — coming soon — kitchen faucets.

California regulators approved new rules to let water agencies recycle wastewater and put it right back into the pipes that carry drinking water to homes, schools and businesses.

It’s a big step for a state that has struggled for decades to secure reliable sources of drinking water for its more than 39 million residents.

And it signals a shift in public opinion on a subject that as recently as two decades ago prompted backlash that scuttled similar projects.

Since then, California has been through multiple extreme droughts, including the most recent one that scientists say was the driest three-year period on record.

California’s new rules require the wastewater be treated for all pathogens and viruses. The treatment is so stringent it removes all of the minerals that make fresh drinking water taste good — so they have to be added back at the end of the process.

FACES

Bubl  ready to shed the suit

Canadian crooner says time has come to pursue new endeavors: ‘It’s been cyclical’

BY ALEXANDRA DEL ROSARIO
Los Angeles Times

For jazz vocalist and Christmas crooner Michael Bubl , the past 20 years have been a constant pattern of writing, promoting and touring new albums. Now, he’s ready for a change.

“I have done the same thing, it’s been cyclical,” he told “Diary of a CEO” podcast host Steven Bartlett.

“I feel like I’m at this point in my life, in my career where I wanna do something different.”

The singer — known for his suave stage presence, smooth vocals and pristine suits — said he’s ready to shed his “cool and Teflon” stage personality and introduce another side of himself: “Mike.”

“Really it’s about being that other guy, not the suit guy,” he said. “Whether that’s in movies or television or whatever it is, it has to happen now.”

The Burnaby, British Columbia-born singer rose to popularity with his 2005 album, “It’s Time.” Two years later, the singer’s “Call Me Irresponsible” earned him his first Grammy Award for traditional pop vo-

cal album. Since then, Bubl  has collaborated with a variety of musicians, won several other Grammy and Juno awards and toured his music across the globe.

While his hits include “Haven’t Met You Yet” and “Everything,” Bubl  also gained popularity for his seasonal serenades. Known as the “King of Christmas,” Bubl  told Bartlett he has been putting his own spin on holiday classics since way before he became a professional singer.

Despite his plans to pivot, Bubl , 48, reassured Bartlett he’s not leaving music behind entirely. He explained: “I like to breathe, and music is my breath.”

He just wants the “excitement of doing something different. ... I need to express myself in a different way.”

During the 90-minute podcast, the singer reflected on the family support he received early in his career, his close relationship with his late grandfather and TikTok’s role in the music industry. He also reflected on how his 10-year-old son Noah’s rare liver cancer diagnosis was a wake-up call. Bubl  shares four children with actor and model Luisana Lopilato.

In a Facebook statement shared in 2016, the five-time Grammy winner confirmed his son’s illness. The singer said he and his wife put their “careers on hold” as Noah began his cancer treatment. Bubl  told Bartlett that the diagnosis “rocked my world.”

“That was a sledgehammer to my reality. I will never be carefree again in my life,” he said.

Michael Bubl  said he is ready to set aside his “cool and Teflon” stage personality and introduce another side of himself: “Mike.”

GREG ALLEN, INVISION/AP



‘Aquaman’ sequel No. 1 at box office

“Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom” led a crowd of new releases at the box office on the weekend before Christmas Monday. The DC and Warner Bros. superhero sequel starring Jason Momoa earned an estimated \$28.1 million in its first three days of release in North America, according to studio estimates Sunday. It was projected to have around \$40 million in domestic ticket sales through Monday.

Despite many new offerings — including the family-friendly animated film “Migration,” the R-rated romantic comedy “Anyone But You,” the wrestling tragedy “The Iron Claw” and a ghostly tearjerker in “All of Us Strangers” — this will go down as a quieter pre-holiday frame at the box office.

It is never great for Hollywood or theaters when Christmas Eve falls on a prime weekend day, but the last time Christmas was on a Monday, in 2017, “Star Wars: The Last Jedi” dominated the four-day charts with \$71.5 million from its second weekend.

More new films opened on Christmas, including the big-budget musical adaptation of “The Color Purple,” Michael Mann’s racing film “Ferrari” and George Clooney’s rowing drama “The Boys in the Boat.” All should get a boost between Christmas and New Year’s, a traditionally lucrative time for movie theaters.

“Aquaman and the Lost King-



WARNER BROS. PICTURES, DC COMICS/AP
Patrick Wilson, left, and Jason Momoa in “Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom.”

dom” is estimated to have cost around \$200 million to produce, not including marketing and promotion costs. Including international estimates at \$80 million through Monday, “Aquaman” is heading toward a \$120 million global debut.

The first film opened to \$67.8 million in 2018 and went on to make almost \$1.2 billion globally.

“Wonka,” in its second weekend, earned an estimated \$17.7 million over the weekend and \$26.1 million including Monday, bringing its total domestic earnings to \$83.6 million.

Other news

■ **Laura Lynch**, a founding member of the Chicks — formerly the Dixie Chicks — died Dec. 22 in a car accident outside of El Paso, Texas. She was 65. The upright bass player-turned-singer left the group in 1995, prior to the band hitting it big. She was replaced by lead singer Natalie Maines.

From wire reports

New this week: Some of 2023’s best films available to stream, ‘Night Court’ returns

Associated Press

Here’s a collection curated by The Associated Press’ entertainment journalists of what’s arriving on TV, streaming services and music platforms this week.

Movies

As the year winds down, most of the movie action is in cinemas. But if you’re not heading out to see “The Color Purple,” “Poor Things” or “Ferrari,” there’s no better time to catch up on some of the year’s best movies. Many of the films that made the top 10 lists of myself and AP Film Writer Lindsey Bahr are available in various places to stream.

■ If you haven’t caught “Barbie” or “Oppenheimer” yet, you can digitally rent Christopher Nolan’s blockbuster biopic, while Greta Gerwig’s pink-hued phenomenon is streaming on Max. Alexander Payne’s masterfully melancholic “The Holdovers,” starring Paul Giamatti, can be rented also, as can Sofia Coppola’s Priscilla Presley drama “Priscilla.”

■ On Netflix, there’s Todd Haynes’ appealingly arch “May December” and the dazzling animated sequel “Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse.” On Prime Video, you can catch two standouts from earlier in the year: A.V. Rockwell’s sprawling New York tale “A Thousand and One” and Wes Anderson’s elaborately layered “Asteroid City.” And if you’re looking for something further afield, seek out “The Eight Mountains,” a majestic epic of friendship, streaming on the Criterion Channel.

— AP Film Writer Jake Coyle

Music

■ Twenty years ago, SM Entertainment boy band TVXQ helped usher in K-pop’s second generation. (To put that into context: K-pop is currently in its fifth generation, and BTS arrived in the third.) By the end of the first generation, led by bubblegum pop like H.O.T.’s “Candy,” TVXQ emerged with a new kind of charisma, producing soulful harmonies with global

resonance and performances alongside Britney Spears. Two decades later, the group is now a duo — made up of original members U-Know Yunho and Max Changmin — which released their ninth studio album, “20&2,” on Tuesday, five years since their last full-length. Across 10 tracks, the veteran act offers listeners a modern take on their familiar melodic talents. Begin with the rocking, tense falsetto pop of lead single “Dark.”

— AP Music Writer Maria Sherman

Television

■ 2024 kicks off in a big way with “America’s Got Talent: Fantasy League” hosted by Terry Crews. In this competition, Mel B returns to judge alongside Simon Cowell, Howie Mandel and Heidi Klum, where they each select from a talent pool of past winners, finalists, fan favorites and other standout contestants from the global “Got Talent” franchise to form their own team of 10 acts. The judges will then guide their acts through the competition where the audience determines who advances to the semifinals and finals. The extravaganza begins Monday, Jan. 1, on NBC and streams on Peacock.

■ The acclaimed Hulu series “Only Murders in the Building” comes to broadcast television in early 2024. The comedy whodunit stars Steve Martin, Martin Short and Selena Gomez as neighbors in a posh New York apartment building who start their own true crime podcast after another resident is murdered. The first three episodes of season one begin airing on ABC on Tuesday, Jan. 2.

■ NBC’s revival of the legal comedy “Night Court” premieres its second season on Tuesday, Jan. 2. The show stars Melissa Rauch as Judge Abby Stone, daughter of the late Harry Stone, who has assumed her father’s position as magistrate presiding over a night court in New York. The comedy also streams on Peacock. The show also stars original cast member John Larroquette.

— Alicia Rancilio



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OPINION

Risk of brain injury presented by your weapon

By DANIEL JOHNSON
Chicago Tribune

The military is currently experiencing a mental health crisis, with suicide now the second leading cause of death for service members. Brain injuries suffered by service members are a big part of this crisis, and new information has revealed the risk that service members face even if they don't deploy.

A recent New York Times investigation into artillery crews serving in Iraq and Syria found that those service members suffered from brain injuries caused by the firing of their own weapons. These injuries are also coming from shoulder mounted weapons and may have also played a role in the mental state of the Maine mass shooter.

I served with many of the men in The New York Times article on the artillery crews in Iraq and Syria and know them well. I have seen what effects these injuries have had on their lives and have experienced it myself. What happened to us doesn't have to happen to other service members, if the Department of Defense and Congress act.

It's hard to explain how it feels to be behind an artillery piece when it fires: the force from the explosion that threw a hundred-pound shell for miles, knocking the breath out of you and causing a shudder in your bones. When the dust clouds began to form from the sand blown off the walls and ground, filling our noses with soot, and staining our uniforms to the point they sometimes looked white, I also often had a dull pain in my head like I had just gotten hit in the face.

It's worse if you're inside or under something; one day I was asleep under a truck when an M777 howitzer suddenly fired a few feet away, the shock wave forcefully ejected me from my slumber and threw me in a state best described as being between consciousness —

the world spinning as I tried to remember where I was.

Now imagine experiencing that feeling over 6,000 times, in the span of less than nine months, like the artillery unit I was with. Or tens of thousands of times, like some of the Marine artillery crews who supported operations in Syria. The high amount of rounds my other units fired during the war on Islamic State is something that U.S. military wasn't prepared for, acknowledging as much in a report published in 2019 on the amount of injuries suffered due to this heavy rate of firing.

I didn't realize that Iraq was just the beginning of hellish experience I would have as I was forced to navigate a care system that told me that these explosions somehow hadn't caused me lasting damage, which included headaches and effects on my mental state. The insidious thing about these types of wounds is that service members often have to attempt to convince the military doctors that they need help. To this day I still suffer from difficulties.

Traumatic brain injuries caused by explosions and other hazards during military service have been linked to mental health issues, including suicide; research published in August analyzing almost 900,000 service members found that individuals with a history of military-identified TBI had significantly higher rates of new-onset mental health conditions than those without. Additional research has shown that service members who have suffered moderate traumatic brain injuries (MTBIs) in the military have a suicide rate that is almost three times the national average.

I remember the night my head started to ring like a doorbell in northern Iraq. It was a dull throbbing pain and I sat there rubbing the sore spot as I tried to go sleep, wondering what was going on. When I got home, I could literally feel something in my head before my mood shifted. It is a horrifying feeling to know that

Dumb liberal choices not smart reason to back Trump

By RAMESH PONNURU
Special to The Washington Post

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg's dubious prosecution of Donald Trump over his payoffs to a mistress boosted the former president in the Republican primary polls. One of the predictable effects of the decision by the Colorado Supreme Court to kick Trump off the ballot is that it will have the same effect.

Predictable is not, however, the same thing as rational. The court's decision can be wrong and even outrageous without being a defensible reason for making Trump president again. Trump supporters sometimes say they feel compelled to support him as a way to stand up to the illegitimate tactics of his opponents: to preserve their freedom to use the political process to choose him as president even as those opponents try to deprive them of that option.

This is deeply unwise. It's self-defeating, because Republicans who react that way are letting the behavior of Trump's opponents dictate their votes. And although the opponents have taken extraordinary measures, it's not simply because they dislike his fans or because Trump is a threat to a nebulously defined establishment. Trump poses an extraordinary threat to the Constitution: That's what created the opportunity for this lawsuit and supplies much of the motivation of those backing it. Voters

should consider the conduct at issue in the Colorado suit disqualifying even if it is not the court's place to say so.

And it isn't. The Colorado court followed what jurist Robert Bork called the "heart's desire" school of jurisprudence. The teaching of that school: If you squint at the Constitution from just the right angle, it makes your fondest wish come true. It works for anyone, regardless of their party affiliation or ideology.

If you're John Eastman, a vice president has the power to keep the president in office with no need to show that he won enough votes in the right places. If you're the Colorado Supreme Court, you have the power to run your very own presidential election. That way, you can give millions of voters what they have badly wanted for years — a political world without Trump — without having to convince any of the voters who have kept it revolving around him.

Such legal arguments treat the Constitution as a set of weapons for use by clever lawyers and eager judges rather than a charter for self-government. It would be irrational for anyone to amend the Constitution to give the vice president the power to overturn an election his ticket lost. The best case for this position — and it's still not very good — is that it's an accidental implication of the 12th Amendment.

The Constitution's impeachment provisions allow a majority of the House plus

something may be wrong with you and worse, there's nothing you can do about it as your life is affected in a multitude of ways. These blast injuries can occur not only in combat, but also during training.

The first step toward any attempt to tackle this problem starts with the DOD. Congress in 2020 asked that the DOD measure blast pressure troops were exposed to and track blast exposure history routinely, but that still hasn't been done almost four years later. The thing about military health care is that if there's no record of an event occurring, then you're not going to get treatment on active duty or as a veteran. The DOD also needs to ensure the best practices to protect against TBI are being undertaken, service members are being properly tested for TBI symptoms, and that TBI exposure is properly tracked in service member medical records. This is not currently happening.

The scale of this problem is not even fully understood — and for artillery personnel, there's no way to avoid exposure to these types of injury unless current practices change. Thousands may be at risk. The issue of these injuries won't just end with us. Outside of artillery units, service members continue to suffer TBIs from attacks in Syria and Iraq even as the DOD has still not properly enacted its own protocols. Just like us, they're going to eventually come back home as they suffer from an illness that has no clear answer. They don't have to, though.

If the DOD takes the right steps, or at least enforces the measures it already has in place, hundreds if not thousands of service members can be saved.

Daniel Johnson is a doctoral fellow at the Hussman School of Media and Journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Johnson was a journalist in the Army in 2016 in Iraq and has contributed reporting to The New York Times and The Washington Post.

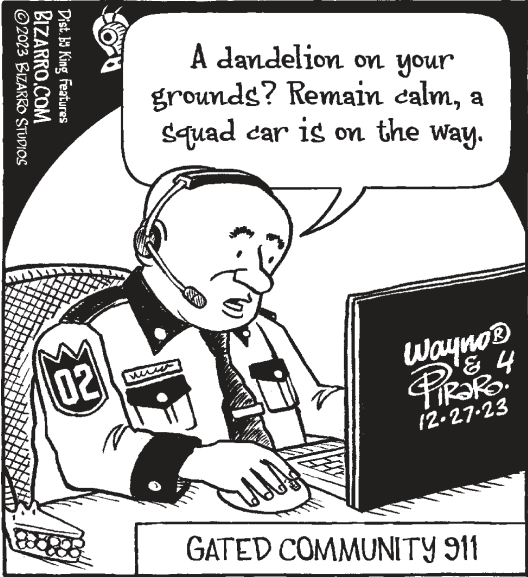
two-thirds of the Senate to convict and then disqualify a president from future office based on his misconduct. It would be perverse to amend it so that a random collection of state courts and state election officials could bypass that process. The justices in Colorado maintain that's exactly what the ratifiers of the 14th Amendment did.

Much of the criticism of the court from Republicans has questioned whether Trump really "engaged in insurrection or rebellion" under the terms of the amendment. They dispute the applicability of the words "insurrection" and "engaged." The early history of applying that term suggests that it takes more than just telling lies to whip up a crowd, and the Colorado court didn't address the point. But it's much more reasonable to suggest that Trump is guilty than it is to suggest that responsibility for that judgment is scattered throughout the land. (The Eastman argument, for the record, has even less going for it.)

For many millions of Trump opponents, and possibly for the Colorado justices in the majority, kicking him off the ballot is emotionally satisfying. Also, for many Republicans, is backing Trump in protest of the decision. The consequences of indulging these sentiments may be less welcome for everyone involved.

Ramesh Ponnuru is the editor of National Review and a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

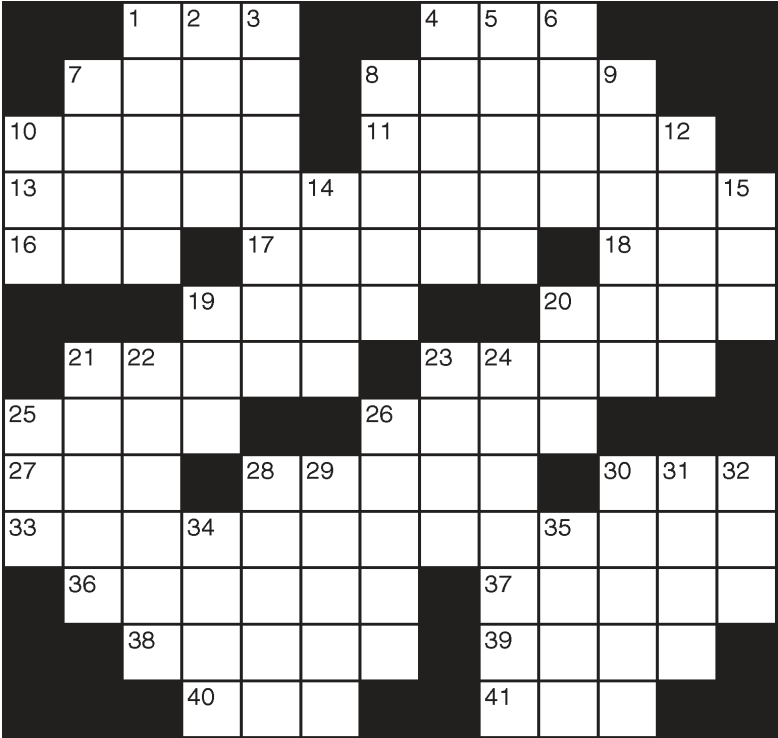
Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



- ACROSS
- 41 Twisty letter
- 14 Garrison
- 1 Brink
- 15 ER workers
- 4 — -friendly
- 19 “Nova” channel
- 7 Lake of Lombardy
- 20 Bud
- 8 Borders on
- 21 Glazier’s sheets
- 10 Meat shunner
- 22 Esoteric
- 11 River formations
- 23 Litigant
- 13 Ranking used in boxing
- 24 Dior product
- 16 Compass dir.
- 25 Cave mammal
- 17 Major artery
- 26 Metal waste
- 18 Train unit
- 28 Colorado music festival town
- 19 Burning heap
- 29 “— Pretty”
- 20 Chest muscles, briefly
- 30 Paces
- 21 Brewer Frederick
- 31 Man of war?
- 23 Ignite
- 32 Designer monogram
- 25 Taverns
- 34 Splits
- 26 Sword fight
- 35 Eventful periods
- 27 Mandela’s org.
- 28 Broadcaster
- 30 Festive
- 33 “Shout” band
- 36 Wesley of “Blade”
- 37 “Paradise Lost” archangel
- 38 Fencing swords
- 39 Gym pads
- 40 NBC weekend show

Answer to Previous Puzzle



12-27 CRYPTOQUIP

L DLEH UBJLTO CP GLJH
WLRMDBPHW GDYVHF NYTQBLTHFR
QLDQ RYCHVUBQ. L NBT’Q
EHHM B RQFBLOUQ JBRH.
Yesterday’s Cryptoquip: MY HEDGES BADLY NEEDED PRUNING, SO I APPROACHED A NEIGHBOR AND DECLARED “LEND ME YOUR SHEARS.”
Today’s Cryptoquip Clue: J equals V

Frazz



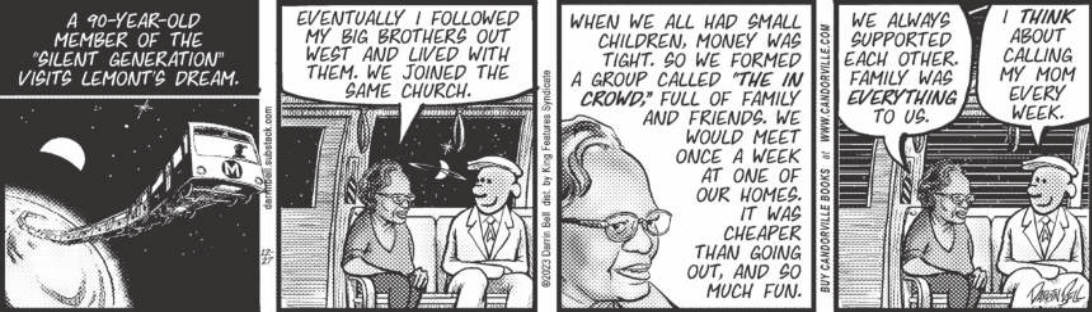
Pearls Before Swine



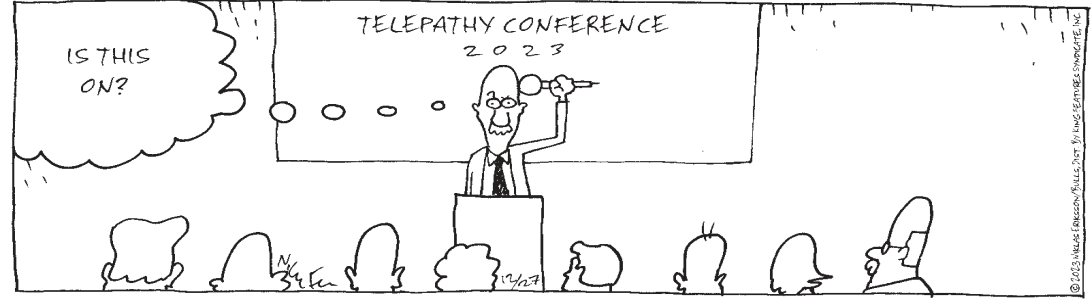
Non Sequitur



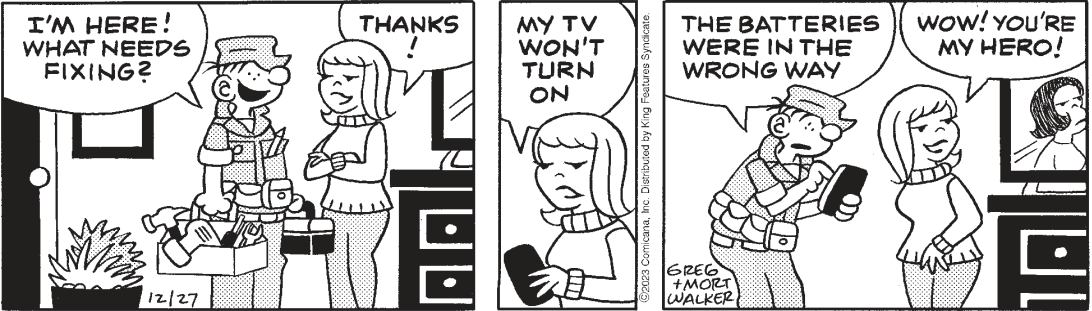
Candorville



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



NHL/COLLEGE FOOTBALL



JEFF ROBERSON/AP

The Chicago Blackhawks' Connor Bedard, right, scores past Blues goaltender Jordan Binnington in the first period on Saturday in St. Louis.

Lacrosse-style goals highlight pre-break action

By JAY COHEN
Associated Press

On the NHL's final night before its holiday break, Connor Bedard and Trevor Zegras combined for a stylish celebration of lacrosse.

Bedard and Zegras each scored a lacrosse-style — or "Michigan" — goal on Saturday in a pair of highlights that will likely be watched repeatedly before the league returns to action on Wednesday night.

It is commonly referred to as a Michigan goal in honor of Mike Legg, who pulled it off while he was playing for the Wolverines during the 1996 NCAA Tournament.

The 18-year-old Bedard executed the move for the first time since he was selected by Chicago with the No. 1 overall pick in this year's NHL draft.

With the Blackhawks down 1-0 in the first period at St. Louis, Bedard got a pass from Philipp Kurashev behind the Blues net. The center then cradled the puck with his stick before slamming it into the corner, over the left shoulder of goaltender Jordan Binnington.

"There was just no one there, and just thought it was a good play, and yeah, kind of went for it," Bedard said during a TV interview between periods.

It was Bedard's 13th goal in his 33rd game. He leads all NHL rookies in goals and assists with 17.

"He's got quick hands and I didn't even realize what happened until it went in," Chicago coach Luke Richardson said. "That's the vision that he has. He can see that when the puck is probably wobbling a little bit. He gets his blade under it and he can scoop it as he's moving. He's able to do those things. Unfortunately we couldn't propel it into a win tonight."

Even with Bedard's dazzling move, the last-place Blackhawks blew a 5-2 lead in the third period of a 7-5 loss to the Blues.

"Talented play and I think it shocked all of us," St. Louis forward Robert Thomas said of Bedard's goal. "That's a hard play to stop and it takes a lot of skill to do that at that speed."

Zegras returned to Anaheim's lineup after missing 20 games with a lower-body injury. He stepped into the top-line center role previously occupied by rookie center Leo Carlsson, who sprained a ligament in his right knee Thursday against Calgary.

With 5:59 left in the Ducks' 3-2 loss to Seattle, the 22-year-old Zegras skated behind the net and picked up the puck with his stick blade before flinging it over Joey Daccord's shoulder from the extended goal line.

It was nothing new for Zegras, who has scored three of the NHL's eight lacrosse-style goals, according to the Ducks.

"When I went behind the net, it's something I obviously feel comfortable with doing," he said. "In my opinion, it's not like a crazy play for me to do. When that goalie goes post to post, usually you've got a little room upstairs. Lucky enough, it went in."

Zegras also scored lacrosse-style goals at Montreal on Jan. 27, 2022, and at Arizona on April 1, 2022. Carolina forward Andrei Svechnikov is the only other player with multiple such goals, according to the Ducks, accomplishing the feat twice in 2019.

Zegras "was terrific," Anaheim coach Greg Cronin said. "It's amazing, he missed two months and he was arguably the most physical guy on the ice."

Seminoles down to 3rd QB after Rodemaker opts out

Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Florida State quarterback Tate Rodemaker will not play in the Orange Bowl and Brock Glenn will start against Georgia on Saturday, the Seminoles said Monday.

Earlier in the day, 247Sports and The Athletic reported Rodemaker intends to enter the transfer portal.

Rodemaker participated in open practices leading up to the Christmas break. The Seminoles (13-0) arrived in Fort Lauderdale on Christmas night to begin final preparations for the matchup with Georgia (12-1) and Florida State coach Mike Norvell spoke of Glenn's looming start after getting off the plane.

Glenn also started the ACC championship game for Florida State.

"Definitely excited to see him take the step from his first start to his second start," Norvell said. "A lot of confidence in what he'll be able to do, what he'll be able to accomplish. It's part of the new age of college athletics. I know Brock is going to be fired up and excited for the opportunity that he has."

A redshirt junior quarterback, Rodemaker stepped in for injured Jordan Travis on Nov. 18 to guide Florida State to a win over North Alabama. A week later, he led Florida State to a victory at Florida. In 2023, Rodemaker completed 32 of 56 passes for 510 yards with five touchdowns and no interceptions.

Glenn has completed 10 of 25 passes for 90 yards this season, starting for the Seminoles against Louisville in the ACC championship game. Early enrollee Luke



ERIK VERDUZCO / AP

Florida State quarterback Tate Rodemaker has opted not to play in the Orange Bowl against Georgia and will reportedly enter the transfer portal. Rodemaker had practiced with the team last week.

Kromenhoek, who signed on Wednesday, is also set to join the team for bowl practices.

The Seminoles have also welcomed in Washington State transfer Cam Ward and Oregon State transfer DJ Uiagalelei for visits in December. Neither quarterback has made a decision about where he will play in 2024.

Florida State will be shorthanded for the bowl game. Running back Trey Benson, wide receiver Johnny Wilson and defensive end

Jared Verse have all entered the NFL draft early and opted out. Tight end Jaheim Bell and defensive tackle Fabien Lovett are entering the draft but have not clarified if they will play in the bowl game.

"It's about the players that are here and the work that they put in," Norvell said. "I'm grateful for every player that we have."

Georgia was scheduled to arrive in South Florida late Tuesday afternoon.

Eastern Michigan apologizes for player's punch that sparked brawl

Associated Press

YPSILANTI, Mich. — Eastern Michigan's athletic director apologized to South Alabama on Sunday, a day after an EMU player raced onto the field after the 68 Ventures Bowl and punched an opposing player in the head, sparking a brawl.

Freshman Gio Lopez threw for three touchdowns, and the Jaguars trounced the Eagles 59-10.

The confrontation happened as South Alabama's players, cheer squad and band lined up to sing the school song on Saturday night on its home field, Hancock Whitney Stadium in Mobile, Ala..

An unidentified EMU player charged into the group and punched a South Alabama player

in the back of the head. Another South Alabama player dragged the EMU player onto the field, sparking a free-for-all among members of both teams as smaller skirmishes also broke out.

"We strongly condemn the actions of some of the student-athletes on the EMU football team in the ugly incident that took place following last night's 68 Ventures Bowl," Eastern Michigan athletic director Scott Wetherbee said in a statement Sunday. "We are deeply upset and embarrassed by what happened. ... What happened was completely unacceptable."

Wetherbee reiterated what EMU coach Chris Creighton said in his postgame news conference, that there is "absolutely no place

for this kind of incident" in the football program. He apologized to the EMU community, the South Alabama team and its fans.

Wetherbee said he had been in contact with South Alabama's athletic director and that Creighton had reached out to Jaguars coach Kane Wommack. He also said EMU had been in contact with the Mid-American Conference commissioner and that the parties will work to investigate the incident, promising appropriate actions as more information is gathered.

South Alabama AD Joel Erdmann issued a statement Sunday saying he was disappointed in the postgame conflict, but was grateful that EMU "took ownership" of the confrontation and apologized.

ROUNDUP

Knicks snap Bucks' winning streak

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Bucks hadn't just been beating them, they were beating them easily.

So in front of a sold-out home crowd and a national TV audience, the New York Knicks used the Christmas stage to make their stand against Milwaukee.

Jalen Brunson scored 38 points and the Knicks snapped Milwaukee's seven-game winning streak, ending their lengthy skid against the Bucks with a 129-122 victory Monday.

The Knicks had dropped nine straight meetings, including a 130-111 loss on Saturday in the opener of this two-game series. The Bucks had routed New York twice while rolling through their December schedule, but they haven't solved Brunson all season, and the point guard got plenty of help from his teammates this time.

"They're a good team. We feel like we're a good team as well, so just kind of taking that challenge, accepting that challenge that we hadn't got them yet," guard Immanuel Quickley said. "It had been a while, so this was a good one to get."

Julius Randle added 24 points and nine rebounds, RJ Barrett bounced back from a poor game Saturday with 21 points and Quickley came off the bench for 20.

Giannis Antetokounmpo and Damian Lillard each scored 32 points for the Bucks, who fell to 9-2 this month. Khris Middleton added 24.

The Bucks rang up 146 points against the Knicks in the quarter-finals of the In-Season Tournament on Dec. 5 and didn't cool off much Saturday. But they seemed short on energy Monday in the middle of an extended Christmas stay in New York, with still another game remaining in the city when they visit Brooklyn on Wednesday.

"We knew coming in everything that we were lined up for and it is what it is," Lillard said. "We got the first one, we came in for this one, they got off to a good start, they played a great game and we just got outplayed."

Milwaukee came in averaging 132.4 points in December, but couldn't even break 40 until there were less than four minutes remaining in the first half. The Bucks trailed by 16 with 4½ minutes remaining in the game before a late flurry that made the score closer than the game felt.

"I thought they out-competed us today for the most part," Bucks coach Adrian Griffin said. "I thought offensively we got some good looks, but we just couldn't knock them down. And when



SETH WENIG/AP

The New York Knicks' Jalen Brunson puts up a shot over the Milwaukee Bucks' Damian Lillard, left, and Khris Middleton during the second half Monday in New York. The Knicks won 129-122.

you're on the road, you get clean looks, you've got to knock them down."

Celtics 126, Lakers 115: Kristaps Porzingis had 28 points and 11 rebounds, Jayson Tatum added 25 points and visiting Boston defeated Los Angeles for the first time in a Christmas Day meeting.

Jaylen Brown had 19 points and Derrick White chipped in with 18 points and 11 rebounds. All five starters had at least 18 points for the Celtics, who have won three straight and 12 of their past 14.

Anthony Davis scored a game-high 40 points with 13 rebounds, LeBron James had 16 points, nine rebounds and eight assists, but the Lakers have dropped six of eight since winning the inaugural In-Season Tournament.

Boston successfully kept Los Angeles at arm's length in the final quarter, despite Davis hitting the 40-point mark for the 40th time in a regular season game.

Mavericks 128, Suns 114: Luka Doncic scored 50 points to eclipse 10,000 for his career and had 14 assists, lifting visiting Dallas to the win over Phoenix.

Doncic capped a Christmas Day full of NBA games with a stellar performance, hitting 8 of 16 from 3 and all 12 of his free throws. He eclipsed 10,000 career points in the first quarter to reach the milestone in 358 career games, seventh-fastest in NBA history.

Dereck Lively II had 20 points and 10 rebounds after missing the previous four games with an ankle sprain and Tim Hardaway Jr. added 18 points.

Phoenix's Grayson Allen scored

19 of his 32 points in the third quarter to help the Suns rally from a 15-point deficit. Chimezie Metu added 23 points and a career-high 19 rebounds.

Heat 119, 76ers 113: Rookie Jaime Jaquez Jr. scored 31 points and got his first double-double, Bam Adebayo finished with 26 points and 15 rebounds and host Miami held on to beat Philadelphia.

Heat coach Erik Spoelstra improved to 9-0 on Christmas, the best record in NBA history for head coaches on the holiday.

Tyler Herro scored 22 points, Duncan Robinson added 16 and Kyle Lowry had 12 for the Heat in what became his first Christmas win. Jaquez also grabbed 10 rebounds for Miami, which held a 56-36 edge on the boards.



RYAN SUN/AP

Boston Celtics center Kristaps Porzingis dunks the ball during the first half against the Los Angeles Lakers on Monday in Los Angeles.

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference				
Atlantic Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	23	6	.793	—
Philadelphia	20	9	.690	3
New York	17	12	.586	6
Brooklyn	14	15	.483	9
Toronto	11	18	.379	12
Southeast Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	17	11	.607	—
Miami	18	12	.600	—
Atlanta	12	17	.414	5½
Charlotte	7	20	.259	9½
Washington	5	23	.179	12
Central Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Milwaukee	22	8	.733	—
Cleveland	17	13	.567	5
Indiana	14	14	.500	7
Chicago	13	18	.419	9½
Detroit	2	27	.069	19½
Western Conference				
Southwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Dallas	18	12	.600	—
New Orleans	17	13	.567	1
Houston	15	12	.556	1½
Memphis	9	19	.321	8
San Antonio	4	24	.143	13
Northwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Minnesota	22	6	.786	—
Denver	22	10	.688	2
Oklahoma City	18	9	.667	3½
Utah	12	18	.400	11
Portland	7	21	.250	15
Pacific Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Sacramento	17	11	.607	—
L.A. Clippers	17	12	.586	½
L.A. Lakers	16	15	.516	2½
Golden State	15	15	.500	3
Phoenix	14	15	.483	3½
Monday's games				
New York 129, Milwaukee 122				
Denver 120, Golden State 114				
Boston 126, L.A. Lakers 115				
Miami 119, Philadelphia 113				
Dallas 128, Phoenix 114				
Tuesday's games				
Brooklyn at Detroit				
Orlando at Washington				
Atlanta at Chicago				
Indiana at Houston				
Memphis at New Orleans				
Minnesota at Oklahoma City				
Utah at San Antonio				
Sacramento at Portland				
Charlotte at L.A. Clippers				
Wednesday's games				
Philadelphia at Orlando				
Toronto at Washington				
Milwaukee at Brooklyn				
New York at Oklahoma City				
Phoenix at Houston				
Cleveland at Dallas				
Thursday's games				
Detroit at Boston				
Dallas at Minnesota				
Indiana at Chicago				
Utah at New Orleans				
Memphis at Denver				
Miami at Golden State				
San Antonio at Portland				
Charlotte at L.A. Lakers				
Scoring leaders				
Through Monday				
	G	FG	FT	PTS
Embiid, PHI	25	294	258	874
Doncic, DAL	28	320	186	939
Antetokoun., MIL	29	332	218	893
Gil.-Alex., OKC	26	289	197	802
Durant, PHO	25	261	182	757
Fox, SAC	22	228	124	651
Young, ATL	27	240	188	765
Curry, GS	28	246	155	781
Mitchell, CLE	22	212	118	610
Tatum, BOS	28	257	155	752
Jokic, DEN	31	312	158	817
Lillard, MIL	28	213	214	733
Brunson, NY	29	270	131	756
Maxey, PHI	28	250	133	724
James, LAL	28	263	121	711

Scoreboard

American Conference							
East							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
x-Miami	11	4	0	.733	463	314	
Buffalo	9	6	0	.600	403	276	
e-N.Y. Jets	6	9	0	.400	231	315	
e-New England	4	11	0	.267	212	322	
South							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
Houston	8	7	0	.533	328	331	
Indianapolis	8	7	0	.533	354	372	
Jacksonville	8	7	0	.533	331	343	
e-Tennessee	5	10	0	.333	274	321	
North							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
x-Baltimore	12	3	0	.800	417	244	
Cleveland	10	5	0	.667	345	311	
Cincinnati	8	7	0	.533	318	345	
Pittsburgh	8	7	0	.533	257	291	
West							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
Kansas City	9	6	0	.600	333	265	
Denver	7	8	0	.467	327	377	
Las Vegas	7	8	0	.467	285	294	
e-L.A. Chargers	5	10	0	.333	325	369	

National Conference							
East							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
x-Philadelphia	11	4	0	.733	392	366	
x-Dallas	10	5	0	.667	451	286	
e-N.Y. Giants	5	10	0	.333	214	371	
e-Washington	4	11	0	.267	309	453	
South							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
Tampa Bay	8	7	0	.533	326	302	
Atlanta	7	8	0	.467	287	288	
New Orleans	7	8	0	.467	331	297	
e-Carolina	2	13	0	.133	236	381	
North							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
y-Detroit	11	4	0	.733	412	355	
Green Bay	7	8	0	.467	333	331	
Minnesota	7	8	0	.467	314	299	
Chicago	6	9	0	.400	314	345	
West							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
y-San Francisco	11	4	0	.733	444	267	
L.A. Rams	8	7	0	.533	357	332	
Seattle	8	7	0	.533	320	352	
e-Arizona	3	12	0	.200	275	403	

e-Eliminated from playoffs
x-clinched playoff spot
y-clinched division

Thursday's game

L.A. Rams 30, New Orleans 22

Saturday's games

Pittsburgh 34, Cincinnati 11
Buffalo 24, L.A. Chargers 22

Sunday's games

Miami 22, Dallas 20
Detroit 30, Minnesota 24
Tampa Bay 30, Jacksonville 12
Cleveland 36, Houston 22
Seattle 20, Tennessee 17
New England 26, Denver 23
Atlanta 29, Indianapolis 10
Green Bay 33, Carolina 30
N.Y. Jets 30, Washington 28
Chicago 27, Arizona 16

Monday's games

Baltimore 33, San Francisco 19
Philadelphia 33, N.Y. Giants 25
Las Vegas 20, Kansas City 14

Thursday, Dec. 28

N.Y. Jets at Cleveland

Saturday, Dec. 30

Detroit at Dallas

Sunday, Dec. 31

Arizona at Philadelphia
Atlanta at Chicago
Carolina at Jacksonville
L.A. Rams at N.Y. Giants
Las Vegas at Indianapolis
Miami at Baltimore
New England at Buffalo
New Orleans at Tampa Bay
San Francisco at Washington
Tennessee at Houston
Pittsburgh at Seattle
Cincinnati at Kansas City
L.A. Chargers at Denver
Green Bay at Minnesota

NFL calendar

Jan. 13-15 — Wild Card playoff games.
Jan. 20-21 — Division playoff games.
Jan. 28 — AFC and NFC championship games.
Feb. 11 — Super Bowl 58 at Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas.

SUNDAY ROUNDUP

Sanders' last-second FG lifts Miami

Associated Press

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — Jason Sanders had waited all season for this moment. On a Miami Dolphins team that scores more touchdowns than any other in the NFL, the former All-Pro kicker hadn't needed to attempt many field goals.

Sanders entered Sunday's matchup against the Dallas Cowboys with just 21 field goal attempts on the year, but Miami needed his booming right leg in its biggest game of the season, and he delivered.

Sanders kicked his fifth field goal of the day, a 29-yarder as time expired, and the Dolphins secured a playoff berth with a 22-20 victory over the Cowboys.

"Not every year can be an All-Pro year," said Sanders, who is 22 of 26 on field goals and 5 of 7 from 50-plus yards. "I think I'm still hitting the kicks. I'm still right where I need to be."

Tua Tagovailoa threw for 293 yards and a touchdown for the AFC East-leading Dolphins (11-4), who beat a team with a winning record for the first time this season. He connected with Tyreek Hill twice on the decisive drive, which covered 64 yards and took the final 3:27 off the clock.

Hill, who leads the NFL in receiving yards, had nine catches for 99 yards after missing last week's victory over the New York Jets with an ankle injury.

Miami has the NFL's top passing and scoring offense, as well as a top-five rushing attack and an ascending defense. All the Dolphins' wins entering Week 16, however, came against teams that were .500 or worse.

"It's always big when you do something that, internally, you know that you're capable of," Dolphins coach Mike McDaniel said. "When it comes to fruition, it's pretty satisfying. ... Nobody on this team thought we were going to lose that game, and that's pretty cool when everyone tells you that you can't do X, Y or Z."

Lions 30, Vikings 24: Detroit clinched its first division title in 30 years, using two rushing touchdowns from Jahmyr Gibbs and 106 receiving yards and a third-quarter go-ahead score by Amon-Ra St. Brown to beat injury-plagued host Minnesota.

Ifeatu Melifonwu picked off Minnesota's Nick Mullens at the 5-yard line on an off-target pass to an open Justin Jefferson with 49 seconds left to seal the win. Mullens was intercepted four times.

Jared Goff passed for 257 yards without a turnover and David Montgomery had a rushing touchdown for the Lions (11-4). Detroit secured a home playoff game for



REBECCA BLACKWELL/AP

Dolphins kicker Jason Sanders, center, celebrates after kicking the game-winning field goal as time expired against the Dallas Cowboys on Sunday in Miami Gardens, Fla.

the first time in 22 seasons at Ford Field, where an NFC North champions banner will soon hang. The last one was for winning the NFC Central in 1993.

Mullens threw for two scores, a diving 26-yard catch by Jefferson with 29 seconds left in the first half and a 6-yard toss to K.J. Osborn that gave the Vikings (7-8) a 21-17 lead early in the third quarter one play after a 47-yard heave to Osborn.

Buccaneers 30, Jaguars 12: Baker Mayfield threw for 283 yards and two touchdowns, and NFC South-leading host Tampa Bay won its fourth straight while extending Jacksonville's skid to four games.

Mayfield threw a pair of TD passes as the Buccaneers (8-7) built a 20-0 halftime lead. In both cases, the Bucs cashed in after intercepting Trevor Lawrence, who struggled after spending the past week in the NFL's concussion protocol.

The Jaguars (8-7) remained in a first-place tie atop the AFC South with Indianapolis and Houston because both also lost Sunday.

Browns 36, Texans 22: Amari Cooper set a franchise record with 265 yards receiving and scored two touchdowns and a 2-point conversion as visiting Cleveland beat Houston to move closer to a playoff berth.

The Browns (10-5) are all but guaranteed their second postseason appearance since 2002.

Joe Flacco threw for 368 yards with three touchdowns and two interceptions in his fourth start for the Browns, who built a 22-7 halftime lead and cruised to their third

straight victory.

Seahawks 20, Titans 17: Geno Smith threw his second touchdown pass of the fourth quarter, a 5-yarder to Colby Parkinson with 57 seconds left, and visiting Seattle beat Tennessee to remain in playoff contention.

The Seahawks (8-7) have won two straight but still need to win out and get some help to clinch their second playoff berth in three seasons. The Titans (5-10) lost consecutive games for the third time this season.

Patriots 26, Broncos 23: Chad Ryland made a career-long 56-yard field goal with 2 seconds left, and visiting New England dealt a near-fatal blow to Denver's playoff hopes.

The Patriots (4-11) scored a pair of touchdowns in a 6-second span of the third quarter, then fended off a furious fourth-quarter rally by the Broncos (7-8). Denver now has just a 6% chance of ending an eight-year playoff drought, according to the NFL's calculations.

Falcons 29, Colts 10: Taylor Heinicke provided turnover-free leadership at quarterback, passing for 229 yards and a touchdown to lead host Atlanta past Indianapolis.

The Falcons (7-8) benched Desmond Ridder this week for the second time this season following two straight losses. Heinicke delivered, completing 23 of 33 passes, including a 24-yard touchdown pass to Kyle Pitts. Tyler Allgeier added a 31-yard touchdown run. The Falcons set a season high in scoring.

Packers 33, Panthers 30: Jor-

dan Love threw for two touchdowns, ran for one and made two big completions to set up Anders Carlson's 32-yard field goal with 19 seconds left, and visiting Green Bay survived a fourth-quarter rally by Carolina.

Love threw touchdown passes of 21 yards to rookie Dontayvion Wicks and 5 yards to Romeo Dobbs and scored on a quarterback sneak as the Packers snapped a two-game losing streak.

The Packers (7-8) remain one game behind the Seattle Seahawks and Los Angeles Rams in the NFC wild-card race.

Jets 33, Commanders 30: Greg Zuerlein kicked a 54-yard field goal with 5 seconds left, and host New York beat Washington after blowing a 20-point, third-quarter lead.

Jacoby Brissett replaced the benched Sam Howell in the third quarter and led the Commanders on three straight touchdown drives, including Antonio Gibson's 2-yard run that put Washington ahead 28-27 with 4:52 remaining.

The Jets (6-9) got the ball back with 1:41 remaining, and Trevor Siemian marched New York into range for Zuerlein's kick. It was the second win in eight games for the Jets.

Bears 27, Cardinals 16: Justin Fields threw for a touchdown and ran for a score, and host Chicago beat Arizona.

Khalil Herbert ran for a season-high 112 yards and a touchdown, and the Bears (6-9) bounced back after a late collapse at Cleveland a week earlier.

NFL

Contenders: Baltimore dominated big matchup as other top teams struggled

FROM PAGE 24

in that sense and not make those mistakes and try to find a way to play the game and the best way to win it.”

Kansas City still has a two-game lead over the Raiders and Broncos in the AFC West, but hasn’t clinched the division title yet. The Chiefs need one win over the Bengals or Chargers to wrap it up. But their road back to the Super Bowl will look different. Mahomes is likely going to have to play the first road playoff game of his career if the Chiefs advance beyond the wild-card round.

After the Chiefs were upset, it appeared there would be a rout in Philadelphia. The Eagles jumped to a 20-3 halftime lead over the Giants that sent Tommy DeVito to the bench.

But a pair of turnovers, including a pick-6 by Adoree Jackson off Jalen Hurts, got New York closer and Tyrod Taylor threw a 69-yard TD pass to Darius Slayton that cut it to 30-25 with 5:22 left.

Down 33-25, the Giants had a chance despite clumsy clock management. Taylor’s pass from Philadelphia’s 26 was picked in the end zone to end the game.

The Eagles (11-4) snapped a three-game losing streak and stayed in control of the NFC East while maintaining an outside shot to earn the No. 1 seed. But a shaky performance against the Giants isn’t going to silence critics. The Eagles often haven’t looked like the team that went to the Super Bowl last year.



Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes fumbles as he's hit by Las Vegas Raiders defensive end Malcolm Koonce on Monday in Kansas City, Mo. Mahomes made consecutive turnovers in the Chiefs' 20-14 loss.

Nick Sirianni
Eagles head coach

“We know we have better football in us. To be 11-4 and still have better football left in you, that’s encouraging, but let’s go. We have to get there.”

“We know we have better football in us,” coach Nick Sirianni said.

“To be 11-4 and still have better football left in you, that’s encouraging, but let’s go. We have to get there. We have to get there and saying we have two more games before the playoffs start, all we’re thinking about is the next game against a team that’s going to come in here and try to take what we have as well.”

Monday’s results along with the rest of Week 16 left more questions open across the NFL. There’s two weeks remaining to answer those before the playoffs.



GODOFREDO A. VASQUEZ/AP

Baltimore Ravens quarterback Lamar Jackson celebrates with wide receiver Nelson Agholor after connecting on a touchdown pass against the San Francisco 49ers in Santa Clara, Calif., on Monday.

Jackson leads Ravens past 49ers in clash of top teams

By JOSH DUBOW
Associated Press
SANTA CLARA, Calif. — If the rare late-season matchup between the top teams in the NFL was a statement game, Lamar Jackson and the Baltimore Ravens delivered a loud one to the rest of the league.

Jackson threw two touchdown passes in a span of 18 seconds in the third quarter and the Ravens intercepted Brock Purdy four times in a 33-19 victory over the San Francisco 49ers on Monday night.

“Our guys work hard. They compete hard. Everybody wants to be respected,” coach John Harbaugh said. “There’s one way to be respected, and that’s to go out there and earn that.”

Jackson and the Ravens (12-3) turned a highly anticipated matchup between the top two teams in the NFL into a lopsided win with strong performances on both sides of the ball.

Kyle Hamilton and the defense set the tone early by intercepting Purdy on three of the first four drives of the game for the 49ers (11-4) before Jackson started to take over.

He scrambled 30 yards to set up a field goal on the final play of the first half to give the Ravens a 16-12 lead and then helped put the game away early in the third quarter.

After Baltimore forced a punt on the opening drive of the second half, Jackson capped a drive by

throwing a 6-yard touchdown pass to Nelson Agholor.

Purdy was then intercepted by Patrick Queen on the next play from scrimmage. Jackson immediately turned that into another score with a 9-yard TD pass to Zay Flowers that made it 30-12.

“I thought Lamar had an MVP performance tonight,” Harbaugh said. “It takes a team to create a performance like that, but it takes a player to play at that level, to play at an MVP level, it takes a player to play that way. Lamar was all over the field.”

Jackson threw for 252 yards, ran for 45 more and vaulted past Purdy to become the MVP favorite, according to FanDuel Sportsbook. His only real mishap came when he got called for intentional grounding in the end zone after nearly tripping over the umpire, leading to a safety in the first quarter.

“We got the W,” Jackson said. “I don’t really care about performance. I just want to win. That’s what happened tonight. On Christmas, I got my gift.”

Purdy had his roughest game as a pro, becoming the first 49ers quarterback to throw four interceptions in a game since Colin Kaepernick in 2015, adding a few more near interceptions and being unable to generate the big plays that made him the league’s most efficient quarterback coming into the game.

Purdy finished 18 for 32 for 255 yards before getting replaced by

Sam Darnold after getting a stinger in the fourth quarter.

“I didn’t mind his demeanor,” coach Kyle Shanahan said about Purdy. “He stayed in there and kept battling. Our whole team struggled there in the second half, so it wasn’t just him.”

San Francisco’s other MVP candidate fared far better, with running back Christian McCaffrey running for 102 yards and a TD and adding 28 yards receiving. He set a franchise record with his eighth straight game with at least 100 yards from scrimmage.

This marquee matchup marked the second time ever that the teams with sole possession of the best record in each conference played in Week 16 or later.

Both teams remain on top of their conferences. The Niners are in a three-way tie with Philadelphia and Detroit for the best record in the NFC and can still clinch the No. 1 seed and a first-round bye with wins in their final two games.

“The mindset is we can’t let one turn into two,” linebacker Fred Warner said. “We’ve got to wipe this one. Learn from it, of course, watch the tape hard, be honest with yourself, but we’ve got to get right back to work. We can’t let this affect our confidence as a team. We know who we are.”

The Ravens remained a game ahead of Miami for the best record in the AFC and can clinch the No. 1 seed with a win next week against the Dolphins.

NFL

Eagles top Giants to end 3-game skid

Philadelphia maintains control of NFC East despite sloppiness

By DAN GELSTON
Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Yes, of course, Jalen Hurts and coach Nick Sirianni heard the booming chants that echoed throughout the Linc from Eagles fans fed up with the pass-heavy offense that stalled in the second half.

“Run the ball! Run the ball!”

“I think I’d hear that too even if I had a double headset on,” Sirianni cracked.

No, of course, Hurts, Sirianni and offensive coordinator Brian Johnson weren’t going to surrender to the whims of fickle fans and their play-calling proposal from way up in the cheap seats.

So they say.

The Eagles eventually listened, and fans went wild when Kenneth Gainwell ripped off a 22-yard run and D’Andre Swift scored on a 5-yard run — yes, a rushing score that kept their chance of an NFC East title alive.

Hurts scored on the “tush push” that gave him the NFL record for most rushing touchdowns by a quarterback in a season and he threw for 301 yards and a touchdown to lead the Philadelphia Eagles past the New York Giants 33-25 on Monday night.

They even kept the fans happy — even if the Eagles weren’t too pleased with the home crowd.

“They’re supposed to get loud

for the defense,” Hurts said.

The Eagles (11-4) snapped a three-game losing streak that put Philly fans on edge — and led to a shakeup in defensive play calling. The losses to San Francisco, Dallas and Seattle essentially ended Philadelphia’s bid for the No. 1 seed in the NFC.

But the path to a second straight division title is clear. The Eagles need to beat Arizona next week and defeat the Giants again in the season finale to finish atop the NFC East.

After three crushing defeats, it took a visit from the Giants to straighten out the Eagles. The Eagles are 11-0 at the Linc against New York since 2014 and beat the Giants three times last season.

Adoree’ Jackson gave the Giants (5-10) a late spark when he returned an interception 76 yards for a score and Saquon Barkley converted a 2-point conversion that made it 20-18 late in the third quarter.

Hurts and the Eagles held on thanks to the play calls of the fans, many dressed as Santa Claus.

It was still a largely sloppy effort, the kind that cost the Eagles of late against the more elite teams in the NFL.

“I’d love to say we’re close,” Hurts said. “I think it’s trending in the right direction.”

Swift’s TD made it 27-18 and it



MATT SLOCUM/AP

Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Jalen Hurts passes under pressure by New York Giants linebacker Micah McFadden during the first half Monday in Philadelphia. The Eagles won 33-25 for their first win in a month.

came in handy when New York’s Tyrod Taylor — who replaced Tommy DeVito to open the second half — connected with Darius Slayton for a 69-yard score late in the fourth that made it 30-25.

With the Giants driving and at the Eagles 26, Taylor was picked off in the end zone by Kelee Ringo on the final play of the game.

“On those last-second plays, you are just trying to get a guy to get him one-on-one and a chance to make a play,” Taylor said. “Their

guys were kind of restricting our guys physically without saying too much, from making those plays.”

Hurts eventually took care of business in a season where he failed to take care of the ball — his 18 turnovers are among the worst in the NFL.

Hurts had another misstep late in the first half when he ran for a few more yards rather than go out of bounds as the clock ticked down. Instead of having time for one more chance at the end zone, Jake

Elliott kicked a 21-yarder as time expired for a 20-3 halftime lead.

The Eagles had not scored more than 19 points in any of their past three games. And it was their highest first-half point total of the season.

Hurts scored his 15th rushing TD of the season on a 1-yard “tush push” early in the first quarter that gave him the most for a QB in a season in NFL history. Carolina’s Cam Newton held the record at 14 in 2011.

Raiders stun Chiefs with 2 defensive TDs in win

By DAVE SKRETTA
Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The smell of the victory cigars wafted down the tunnel beneath Arrowhead Stadium, straight from the Las Vegas Raiders in the celebratory visiting locker room to the despondent home locker room of the Kansas City Chiefs.

For one, the scent of success. For the other, the stench of a sloppy mess.

Taking advantage of two defensive touchdowns for the second straight week, and riding an aggressive mindset that shut down Patrick Mahomes and the rest of the Kansas City offense, the Raiders held off the Chiefs 20-14 on Monday to not only deny their longtime AFC West rival another division crown, but also keep their postseason hopes alive.

“That was one of our mantras,” Raiders interim coach Antonio Pierce said afterward, “by any means necessary.”

That meant big defensive tackle



REED HOFFMANN/AP

Las Vegas Raiders running back Zamir White (35) fights off Kansas City Chiefs safety Mike Edwards on Monday in Kansas City, Mo.

Bilal Nichols returning a fumble 8 yards for a touchdown, and Jack Jones taking an interception 33 yards for another score 7 seconds later. It meant Aidan O’Connell never completing a pass after the first quarter, yet also never making

the same mistakes that Mahomes made for Kansas City on a soggy Christmas Day.

The Raiders (7-8) became the first NFL team since 2000 to win without completing a pass after the first quarter, and only the fifth team

to beat the Chiefs at Arrowhead Stadium without scoring an offensive touchdown.

“Obviously this was a huge game. It’s a rivalry game,” O’Connell said. “We play them twice a year, every year, so to come into Arrowhead Stadium and win a game like this, it’s pretty awesome. It’s pretty special for our guys.”

Kansas City (9-6) hardly helped its cause: Along with allowing the two defensive TDs, Harrison Butker missed a chip-shot field goal, penalties and dropped passes were again a problem, and twice they failed to convert on fourth down in the second half.

“They played a better game than we did today,” said Chiefs coach Andy Reid, whose team has lost three of four. “On offense we struggled. That’s my responsibility to make sure we put the guys in the right position to make plays, and that didn’t happen the way we wanted it to. I take full responsibility for the way we played offensively there.”

The Chiefs still had a chance in the closing minutes Monday to clinch their eighth straight AFC West title and keep their hopes alive for the No. 1 seed.

But after Mahomes hit Justin Watson for a touchdown with 2:42 to go, the Raiders’ Zamir White broke loose for a 43-yard gain, picking up a first down that allowed them to run out the clock.

Mahomes finished 27-for-44 for 235 yards and the interception; he nearly threw a second but it was overturned upon review.

The Raiders, playing without injured running back Josh Jacobs, won despite a dismal day from their offense. White ran for 145 yards, but much of that came on the final possession. O’Connell was just 9-for-21 for 62 yards, the Raiders were 0-for-3 in the red zone and 3-for-12 on third down, and they had seven fewer first downs than Kansas City.

All that mattered was the score, though.

“That’s why it’s a team sport,” O’Connell said. “It was a team win.”

SPORTS



Breaking the streak
Brunson, Knicks end long skid against Bucks » **NBA, Page 20**

ANALYSIS

Unhappy holidays

Super Bowl contenders had difficult Christmas

BY ROB MAADDI
Associated Press

The Chiefs lost again. The Eagles struggled against the lowly Giants. The 49ers were embarrassed at home.

Christmas Day was rough on Super Bowl contenders except for the Ravens.

Lamar Jackson boosted his MVP chances and Baltimore made a major statement with a convincing 33-19 victory over San Francisco in a prime-time matchup Monday night that featured the NFL's two No. 1 seeds.

The Ravens (12-3) would earn a first-round bye and home-field advantage throughout the AFC playoffs with a win at home against Miami (11-4) on Sunday.

"I'm honored to be in the conversation," Jackson said about improving his bid for his second AP NFL MVP award. "We just have to keep winning to get to February. That's all."

The goal for Jackson isn't an individual award. He wants a Super Bowl ring. The Ravens have won five in a row and can't let up with the Dolphins coming up next.

The 49ers (11-4) were the NFL's hottest team until they ran into Roquan Smith and Baltimore's tenacious defense. Brock Purdy, who became an MVP favorite with a sensational stretch during a six-game winning streak, threw four interceptions and finished the night watching from the sideline after getting banged-up.

Despite the loss, San Francisco is still in control of the NFC's No. 1

seed. The 49ers would clinch the top spot with wins over the Commanders and Rams to close out the regular season.

But the rest of the NFC should have hope after watching the Ravens take down San Francisco. The 49ers, who dominated Philadelphia and Dallas in head-to-head matchups, looked vulnerable against Baltimore.

"I don't think they're demoralized," 49ers coach Kyle Shanahan said about his team. "We weren't balanced, had too many turnovers."

The holiday tripleheader began with a stunner when the defending Super Bowl champion Chiefs gave one away, losing 20-14 to Las Vegas. The Raiders scored a pair of touchdowns on consecutive turnovers by Patrick Mahomes and won a game without completing a pass after the first quarter.

The Chiefs (9-6) have now lost five of eight and will likely have to play their first road playoff game with Mahomes if they even survived the wild-card round.

An offense that has sputtered throughout the season couldn't do much against the Raiders and was unable to overcome the costly mistakes.

"I thought defense played a good game, just two mistakes that gave them two touchdowns there when you're backed up in their red zone so you just can't do that," Mahomes said. "Especially when defense is playing like they're playing, but I just have to be better

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GODOFREDO A. VASQUEZ/AP

San Francisco 49ers quarterback Brock Purdy went from leading his team to six straight wins and being an MVP favorite to throwing four interceptions and watching from the sidelines against the Baltimore Ravens.

Rodemaker exits, FSU down to 3rd QB » College football, Page 19

